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Traces in the Desert: The Poetics of Sand, Dust, and Ash in German Literature

By

Kevin Andrew Gordon

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

German

&

Medieval Studies

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Niklaus Largier, Chair

Professor Winfried Kudszus

Professor Frank Bezner

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Abstract

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In this dissertation, I investigate literary, philosophical, and religious texts from the German tradition which use the figure of the desert to reflect on the conditions of their own possibility, and on larger questions of textual production, memory, and forgetting. I examine these works in four case studies that span the medieval period and the modern era: 1.) The anonymous 14th century mystical song *Granum sinapis* and several sermons by Meister Eckhart; 2.) Hölderlin's late hymn *Der Einzige* and novel *Hyperion*; 3.) Stifter's short story *Der Hagestolz*; and 4.) Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra*. I pay particular attention to the ways in which the images of the desert in these texts function as figures [*figurae*] whose material and figural properties are deployed to interrogate language and memory, and to guide the reader into a landscape of experiential or speculative possibility. After sketching the rhetorical and semiotic relationship between the figure of the desert, memory, and writing in Western literary, cultural, and intellectual discourses, I investigate how the texts in my case studies reshape and redeploy this inherited tradition for their own purposes. Despite their significant differences, all of these texts engage in what I call "desert writing." This "arid" poetics reflects upon its own unstable, "sand-like" qualities through the explicit and implicit use of the desert figure, and through the metonyms of sand, dust, and ash to produce cognitive and experiential landscapes of possibility that push the limits of language and thought. Often represented as "deserts" themselves, these landscapes simultaneously produce hermeneutic meaning and non-hermeneutic effects of perception and sensation. In its unique ability to contain a non-binary "both/and" logic, to simultaneously evoke fullness and emptiness, positivity and negativity, literalness and figurality, the desert is one of the most productive figures for generating new forms of poetry, thought, and experience. This dissertation contributes to established criticism on the desert's poetological and speculative dimensions by synthesizing existing research and forming a new textual constellation that uncovers unacknowledged correspondences between medieval and modern texts.

To my wife Morit, who loves the desert as much as I do.

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Introduction

This dissertation investigates the figure of the desert in its figural, material, and speculative productivity. More specifically, it examines the ways in which German-speaking authors have used the desert figure to interrogate their own poetics, and questions of memory, forgetting, and experience. As far as I know, it is the first study to focus on the nexus of the desert, poetics, and memory in German literature.

My work consists of four case studies that span the Middle Ages and the twentieth century. Each revolves around at least one author, or a related group of authors. The first chapter explores how Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) and other medieval writers use the desert figure to interrogate the limits of language, the unspeakable nature of God, and mystical experience. Eckhart is one of the first to engage in what I call “desert writing.” This poetological form of writing makes use of the desert figure both literally and explicitly (e.g. as a physical setting), and figuratively and implicitly (e.g. as metaphor or metonymy) to address the unstable materiality of language, the limits of memory, and new possibilities of experience.

The second chapter concerns the desert writing of Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843). In a close reading of the hymn *Der Einzige* (*The Only One*) and the novel *Hyperion*, I examine the ways in which Hölderlin’s desert writing engages in a “poetics of sand and ash.” This poetics attempts to temporarily stabilize language through the activation of memory, while at the same time preserving the productive fluidity of language to dissolve the geographic and temporal divides between ancient Greece and the poet’s “Hesperia,” between the past and the present.

Applying a similar metonymic reading of the desert, the third chapter pays close attention to the figures of dust and sand in Adalbert Stifter’s (1805-1868) short story *Der Hagestolz* (*The Bachelors*). These material substances point to the desert and form the core of what I call Stifter’s “poetics of dust and sand.” This poetic mode calls into question the stability of intergenerational, biological memory as embodied by human offspring, and casts doubt on the stability of Stifter’s own attempts to ensure such memory in his writing. Rather than attempt to produce an experience, *Der Hagestolz* exploits the desert’s speculative force to imagine a world devoid of human life and memory.

The final chapter explores Nietzsche’s own “post-human” vision, namely his attempt, via the desert figure, to produce an experiential state of being beyond memory, forgetting, and language. This state of mind, which Friedrich Kittler calls a “flight of ideas” [*Gedankenflucht*], marks the site of eternal return and *der Übermensch*. While Nietzsche’s desert figure marks a site of trial, it is also one of great celebration, as it is where human beings can achieve a new relationship with themselves and the world.

Before I turn to my case studies, it will be helpful if I place my work within established critical frameworks, and further clarify my concept of “desert writing.” As might be expected, the desert has long been a figure of fascination in the humanities. In 2001, it was called a “fashionable theme” by the organizers of a colloquium at the University of Metz (Nauroy et al.). Particularly in French and German scholarship, the desert has been the subject of several recent studies, conferences and symposia (Bouvet; Lindemann and Schmitz-Emans; Lindemann) devoted to “the multiple facets of the paradox involved in the experience – be it real, symbolical or just imagined – of the desert” (Nauroy et al.). Indeed, the “paradoxical” seems to be an essential and appealing characteristic of this at once geographic and “cognitive” (Trop 62) landscape, which assumes ambivalent and at times contradictory forms in the physical world and

in the human imagination. One need only think, for example, of the geological definition of a desert as a region that receives less than ten inches of rainfall per year. This definition makes the continent of Antarctica just as much a “desert” as the more “typical” Sahara, Negev, or Gobi deserts. No less varied are the speculative wastelands of cultural and literary history. In the West, for example, the word “desert” can denote a geographic region, such as a vast expanse of sand, a dense forest, or the sea. But it can also give name to a place within the self, “a safe haven away from the turmoil of the world.” Here, one can not only take refuge, but also engage in a process of (re)construction or self-exaltation that opens up onto other human beings or onto the Other (e.g. God) itself (Nauroy et al.; Dörig).¹

Among the more figurative uses of the desert, one of the most fascinating is its deployment as a poetological trope (Mackrodt, *Aufbrechende Schrift* 35).² Exemplary in this respect are the works of the French-Egyptian poet Edmond Jabès (1912-1991). Jabès’ book *Le Livre des Questions* (*The Book of Questions*), in particular, posits the desert as a privileged site of writing and memory (Jabès and Waldrop ix–x).³ In it, as Derrida notes, we find the beguiling lines: “[t]he garden is speech, the desert writing. In each grain of sand a sign surprises” (Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 68; Derrida, *L’Écriture et la différence* 104).⁴ Jabès draws an analogy between the imagined emptiness of the desert and the emptiness of the blank page which the author confronts – and which confronts the author – at the beginning of every attempt to write (Schmitz-Emans 137). Since the writer must embark upon one of an infinite number of possible (written) paths, this encounter with the page/desert involves a moment of choice and decision, yet it is not guided by any predetermined goal. On the contrary, Jabès views this movement into the desert as one of productive disorientation. Rather than causing any paralyzing sense of aporia, this process instills an inspiring awareness of the text’s infinite renewal – the idea that in writing, as in the desert, the paths are never exhaustible (Schmitz-Emans 138).⁵

While this “flip-side” [*Kehrseite*] of infinite possibility and renewal can be a source of inspiration for Jabès, or for any author who sets forth into the “desert-book” [*le livre désertique*],

¹ Dörig’s *Schenk dir einen Wüstentag!* (Literally: *Give Yourself a Desert Day!*) exemplifies more popular conceptions of the desert in what could be called contemporary “self-help” literature.

² Here I use the words “poetology” and “poetological” to denote the various ways in which a poet reflects on his or her poetry’s conditions of possibility. As Cori Mackrodt writes, the term “poetology” differs from an explicit “poetics” in that it refers to the (often implicit) “self-referentiality” [*Selbstbezügliche*] and “self-negotiations” that

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³ In the introduction to this book, Paul Auster writes that *The Book of Questions* is “a new and mysterious kind of literary work, as dazzling as it is difficult to define. Neither novel nor poem, neither essay nor play, [it] is a combination of all these forms, a mosaic of fragments, aphorisms, dialogues, songs and commentaries that endlessly move around the central question of the book: how to speak what cannot be spoken. The question is the Jewish Holocaust, but it is also the question of literature itself. By a startling leap of the imagination, Jabès treats them as one and the same: ‘I talked to you about the difficulty of being Jewish, which is the same as the difficulty of writing. For Judaism and writing are but the same waiting, the same hope, the same wearing out’” (ix–x).

⁴ “Le jardin est parole le désert écriture. Dans chaque grain de sable, un signe surprend.”

⁵ For Jabès, this was “keine zielorientierte Bewegung auf ein gedanklich antizipiertes Resultat hin; vielmehr ist sie ein Wüstengang im Zeichen der Fragen und der Orientierungslosigkeit: ein Herumirren in jener Wüste von Möglichkeiten, deren plausibelste Chiffre das weiße Blatt ist. Die Kehrseite jenes Ohnmachtsgefühls, mit dem der Schriftsteller durch die Wüste des Schreibbaren irrt, ist die Aussicht auf unendliche Erneuerung des Textes: In der Wüste sind die Wege nie erschöpfbar.”

it must be remembered that this book is “made of sand, ‘of mad sand,’ of infinite, innumerable and vain sand.” For Derrida and other poststructuralists, the desert is a powerful figure that underscores the instability of language and humanity’s ontological distance from God and Truth.⁶ Devoting the third chapter of *Writing and Difference* to *The Book of Questions*, Derrida elaborates on the relationship between words and sand by quoting Jabès directly: “‘Pick up a little sand, wrote Reb Ivri ... then you will know the vanity of the verb’” (Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 68; Derrida, *L’Écriture et la différence* 104).⁷ In its porous, alterable, and palimpsestic materiality (Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 69),⁸ sand is a substance that readily invites such poetological reflection (Gerlach 111).⁹ And although it is difficult to say with certainty why writers choose certain images over others, sand’s evocative figurality and concrete, literal materiality might begin to explain its discursive productivity and poetic appeal. As probably the most iconic and exemplary landscape of sand, the desert shares this fraught mix of properties, and similarly enjoys an “ambivalence” to which many writers are drawn (Schmitz-Emans 151).¹⁰

As Jabès’s work attests, the ambivalence of the desert figure also lends itself readily to speculation on the nature of memory and forgetting. One reason for this is that sand, on the most literal level, is the “material memory” of eroded rocks (Gerlach 111). Throughout history, sand has also been used as a memory aide, a fact attested by the sandboard abacus, used since antiquity as a writing surface in which mathematical calculations were performed. The relationship between sand and forgetting is perhaps even more obvious. Besides the literal image of a forgotten object buried under a thick cover of sand, the intertwined images of the desert-book and the author’s traces within it hint at the fragility of the memories inscribed in such an easily erasable medium. As Monica Schmitz-Emans writes, each word of memory enacts a vain “revolt” [*Auflehnung*] against non-knowing and oblivion. The fact that all written texts ultimately lead to a state of forgetting illustrates metaphorically the flow of each text into the blankness of non-writing [*Nichtschrift*] (Schmitz-Emans 147).¹¹ In this model, poetic memory is under the constant threat of being effaced from the desert sands in which it is inscribed and of

⁶ “This way, preceded by no truth, and thus lacking the prescription of truth’s rigor, is the way through the Desert. Writing is the moment of the desert as the moment of Separation. [...] God no longer speaks to us; he has interrupted himself: we must take words upon ourselves. We must be separated from life and communities, and must entrust ourselves to traces, must become men of vision because we have ceased hearing the voice from within the immediate proximity of the garden. [...] Writing is displaced on the broken line between lost and promised speech. The difference between speech and writing is sin, the anger of God emerging from itself, lost immediacy, work outside the garden.”

⁷ “‘Remasse un peu de sable, écrivait Reb Ivri... tu connaîtras alors la vanité du verbe.’”

⁸ “‘Where is the way? The way is always to be found. A white sheet of paper is full of ways We will go over the same way ten times, a hundred times.’”

⁹ “Diese konkreten Materialeigenschaften haben wiederholt dazu inspiriert, ästhetische Kategorien wie das Fragment oder das Erhabene und poetologische Chiffren wie die Spur, die Flüchtigkeit des Zeichens oder die Einschreibeflächen für Zeichen mit Sand zu verbinden.”

¹⁰ “So schwer oder gar unmöglich es sein mag, alle mit der Wüste und dem Weg durch die Wüste verknüpften Konnotationen in ihrer ihrerseits vielfältigen metaphorischen Valenz auf einen gemeinsamen Nenner zu bringen, so läßt sich doch der Befund erheben, daß die Wüste ein grundsätzlich ambivalenter Ort ist – was förmlich zu der These herausfordert, daß ihre Bedeutung für die poetische Autoreflexion nicht zuletzt auf solcher Ambivalenz beruht.”

¹¹ “Mit jedem Wort der Erinnerung vollzieht sich eine vergebliche Auflehnung des Erinnerens gegen das Nichtwissen. [...] Daß alle schreibend vollzogene Vergegenwärtigung zuletzt doch in dieses Vergessen einmündet, illustriert metaphorisch das Einmünden jeglichen Textes in eine Nichtschrift, ins Weiß.”

which it consists. This view underscores that the stuff of memory is not wax, as Aristotle and others held, but rather sand, an even more precarious and unstable material.

In this dissertation, I use this figural and literal understanding of the desert to read the deserts in several works of German literature. In ways not unlike Jabès, all of the texts I examine deploy the desert to reflect poetologically on the conditions of their own possibility, and to speculate on the nature of memory and forgetting. Inspired by Jabès's statement that "[t]he garden is speech, the desert writing" [*Le jardin est parole, le désert écriture*], I propose the term "desert writing" to approach any text that uses the desert in this specific manner. While this concept alters the sense of Jabès's phrase by changing "desert" from a predicate to a modifier, it remains true to his statement that all writing [*écriture*] "is" a desert. I thus define "desert writing," which Jabès or Derrida might have called *l'écriture du désert*¹² or *l'écriture désertique*, as a specific mode of writing that illustrates its sand-like qualities through the deployment, both explicit and implicit, of the desert figure. Under this rubric I include texts that not only are *about* the desert in a literal or figurative sense, but which present their language as being materially *of* the desert. By this I mean texts whose composition and inscription not only occur literally *in* the desert, but which are figuratively (and knowingly) composed *within* the "sand" of language. At stake in all of these texts, I argue, is a "poetics of sand," aware of its own limits and instabilities, which makes use of the desert's figurative materiality to open up and to guide the reader into new speculative landscapes of possibility. Very often, these landscapes, also figured as deserts, produce both hermeneutic meaning and non-hermeneutic effects of perception and/or sensation.

This dual aspect of the desert figure is evident to varying degrees in each of the my four case studies. As I argue in the first of these, desert writing emerges in the West in late antique and medieval works of mysticism and negative theology. In *Granum sinapis*, a poem likely composed by a follower of Meister Eckhart, the desert functions as a "performative" (Sells 3) image that renounces its own "imageness" [*Bildhaftigkeit*]. It engages in such "linguistic asceticism" in order to describe both a divine instance that is beyond language, and a moment of union with it that is equally unnamable (Keller 200). This apophatic strategy forms part of the unresolvable tension common to many Christian prayer texts between figural representation and allegory on the one hand, and iconoclasm on the other. In an operation similar to that at work in the writings of the 14th century Dominican mystic Henry Suso, the tension within the poem produces both hermeneutic meaning [*Bedeutungsproduktion*] and effects of perception [*Wahrnehmungseffekten*]. In other words, the desert of *Granum sinapis* works simultaneously to affirm and deny figural representation (Largier, "Allegorie und Figuration" 36–37). It does this by creating a homology between the equally nameless divine "ground of being" (Lüers 106; 293–298) and the uncreated part of the reader's soul/intellect, before guiding the reader through several cognitive stages into a moment of affective "non-knowing." In this way, the desert has a distinctly liminal aspect. Not only is it a figure that represents an "empty" cognitive landscape akin to the negativity of God (Largier, "Allegorie und Figuration" 36); more interestingly, it leads the reader through the borderlands between cognition and affect, opening up in the process a non-hermeneutic state of perception, sensation, and possibility. Put another way, the desert hermeneutically *signifies* and non-hermeneutically *enacts* the overcoming of thought to bring about a different kind of experiential "knowing." In medieval Christian mystical settings, this phenomenological state is known as *cognitio experimentalis* ("experiential knowledge"), and

¹² This is the title of a book of essays by the contemporary French novelist Jacques Abeille. From descriptions it seems likely that Abeille uses the term to describe the writing practices of desert-dwelling peoples. However, I have not been able to locate a circulating copy to verify this assumption.

describes a moment of “intense” experiential and sensory possibility (Largier, “Präsenzeffekte” 401). In this at once bodily and embodied state, all thoughts, concepts and words “desiccate,” dissolve, and dematerialize like sand running through the fingers. As a figural vehicle deployed in order to attain this state, the desert points, somewhat paradoxically, to the necessity of its own absence and presence; it insists on non-figuration while also staking claim to its own privileged figurality. The desert’s privilege lies in its threefold status as an “empty” figure that exposes the impossibility of figuration (Haas 316–317); as a metaphor for all that is beyond names and signification; and as a “metatopos” for imagelessness in itself (Keller 200). Yet it is also in this very “emptiness” that the desert has perhaps the fullest potential for transformation, speculative possibility, and new poetic forms.

It is precisely this potential that I explore in this dissertation. I do so fully aware of the inherent risk of annihilating the differences between my texts and ignoring their specific literary, cultural, and historical settings. When I call *Granum sinapis* a “template” for all later desert writing, for example, I do not overlook its own particular medieval context. Instead, I use this poem as a lens to examine the deserts in works by Hölderlin, Stifter, and Nietzsche. In addition to similar poetological configurations and an engagement with the subject of memory, all of these texts share a preoccupation with a concrete, material “earthliness.” By this I mean that as much as they speak of the divine or non-human realms, they are just as interested, often even more so, in producing an experiential moment of “presence” in the here-and-now. This is yet another testament of the vast capacity and productivity of the desert figure, which can simultaneously contain absolute transcendence and absolute immanence in a moment of non-contradiction.

Finally, I would like to note that in an effort to make my work accessible to a non-specialist audience, I have provided English translations of my sources whenever possible.

Inscribing God's Uncreated Page: *Granum sinapis* and Medieval Desert Writing

I: The Foundational Discourses of Desert Writing: A Brief History

Some of the earliest examples of desert writing in the West were composed during the millennium that spans Late Antiquity to the Late Middle Ages (ca. 300-1300 CE). In this chapter, I will examine a number of texts that fit my definition to varying degrees. But I will focus on one particular work that comes closest to engaging in this poetic mode: the early 14th century German mystical song *Granum sinapis* (*The Mustard Seed*). In order to get a handle on this poem, however, we must first say something about the Biblical and monastic discourses of the desert from which it draws and with which it converses.

As most readers of Jewish and Christian Scripture will tell you, the desert is an ambiguous space characterized as much by exile, punishment and privation as by exodus, renewal and salvation (Williams 7). In Christian monastic traditions, one of the more interesting aspects of the desert's ambiguity is its eschatological significance as a provisional paradise (Brown 221) or "heaven's waiting room" (Sloterdijk 90). For the early Christian ascetics who fled to the wastes of Egypt and the Levant because for them, as for Jerome (347-420 CE), "a town [was] a prison, and the wilderness [*solitudo*] a paradise" (Jerome and Wright 411),¹³ the desert was both utopian counter-city (Brown 217) and a salvific wilderness that dwelled within. Through sacred reading [*lectio divina*] (Studzinski; Jasper 15) and the interpretation of scripture (Deeg, Michel, and Goldschmidt),¹⁴ Church Fathers such as Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335-395 CE), John Cassian (ca. 360-435 CE), and Eucherius of Lyon (ca. 380-449 CE) elaborated a discourse of the inner paradise [*paradeisos*] or desert [*desertum*] through the allegorization and harmonization of biblical and extrabiblical texts (Williams 46–50; McGinn, "Ocean and Desert" 157). In turn, the interiorized desert they and others imagined became a "technical term in mystical theology" for a "state of mind through which the mystic passes to the consummation of the divine nuptials" (Williams 47).

In the centuries that followed, many others refined the discourse of the mystical desert. Most notable among them were Pseudo-Dionysius (5th-6th century CE), Johannes Scotus Eriugena (ca. 815-877 CE), Hugh of St. Victor (ca. 1096-1141 CE), Thomas Gallus (ca. 1200-1246 CE), Bonaventure (1221-1274 CE), and Meister Eckhart (ca. 1260-1328 CE), to name only several key figures. As the father of Christian apophatic theology (from the Greek, *apophasis*: "un-saying," "saying away"), which "affirms the ultimate ineffability of the transcendent" God while at the same time "turning back upon the naming used in its own affirmation of ineffability" (Sells 3), Dionysius was the first author available in the West who linked the story of Moses's journey into the desert and ascent of Mount Sinai with a teaching on the "unlimited and unknowable character of the divine nature" (McGinn, "Ocean and Desert" 162). In the early twelfth century, Hugh of St. Victor, who wrote a commentary on Dionysius's *Celestial Hierarchy*, took advantage of the desert's inherent ambiguity to formulate a mystical itinerary in

¹³ Epistle 125.

¹⁴ Key biblical texts included, among others, Psalm 143:6 ("My soul is as earth without water unto thee"); Hosea 2:14 ("Behold I will allure her, and will lead her into the wilderness [*solitudinem*], and I will speak to her heart"); Isaiah 35:1 ("The desert shall rejoice and blossom"); and the Song of Songs 8:5 ("Who is this that cometh up from the desert [*deserto*], flowing with delights, leaning upon her beloved?").

which the ascending soul passes through deserts of vanity and humble simplicity into a third desert of purity (Deeg, Michel, and Goldschmidt 203; Butler 189; Richard of St. Victor and Kirchberger 203, 224; Schmidt 75–76).¹⁵ And as one of the best-known representatives of this discourse of the penetrable desert, St. Bonaventure similarly described the ascent of the soul to divine union as a three-fold path through the desert (Bonaventure, Boehner, and Brown 1, 1–3; Largier, “Aufstieg und Abstieg” 52). This more positive discourse of ascent by means of the “ladder” [*scala*] of creation was rivaled by the more negative discourse of descent, which presented the desert as impenetrable and “wayless.” Favored by Eckhart and others who drew on Eriugena’s translations of and commentaries on Dionysius, this discourse rejected the metaphor of the “way” and spoke instead of “sinking” into the nameless “abyss,” “nothingness,” or “desert” of the divine. In this non-place beyond creation, the uncreated part of the soul and the divine ground could converge in reciprocal two-way movement and unite without distinction (Smith 44; McGinn, “Ocean and Desert” 162–164; Beierwaltes 251; P. A. Dietrich 31; Asmuth).¹⁶

While scholars have devoted considerable attention to the desert’s allegorical and rhetorical role in such mystical settings, they have generally overlooked the desert’s strong symbolic and practical connections with memory.¹⁷ This is surprising given the scriptural link between the two. Since Exodus, the physical desert has been understood as a place where one went to remember God, or to be remembered by God. In the first centuries of Christianity, the desert continued to be a refuge for those, as Cassian writes, “in whom the apostolic fervor still existed.” “[M]indful of the earlier perfection,” these men and women abandoned their towns and cities and “began to live in rural and more secluded places and to practice privately and individually what they remembered had been taught by the apostles in a general way throughout the body of the church” (Cassian and Ramsey 638).¹⁸

The inner desert’s equally close ties to memory can be seen in Augustine (354-430 CE), one of the first writers in the Latin West to free the desert from its literal meaning (Lindemann 87). In his Sermon 47 on the Old Testament, in which he elaborates on Ezekiel 34:25 (“I will make a covenant of peace with them, and banish wild beasts from the land, and they will dwell in the desert and sleep in the woods securely.”), Augustine asks,

What is “in the desert [*eremo*]”? In solitude. What is in solitude? Inside, in the conscience. It is a solitude indeed, because not only do no other human beings cross it, they do not even see it. Let us dwell there in hope, because we are not yet there in fact. After all, everything we have outside chops and changes [*fluctuat*] with the storms and trials of the world. The desert is inside, that’s where we should interrogate our faith. Let us ask if there is charity there inside. Let us see if it is not just the lips but the heart uttering, when we say *forgive us our debts, as we too forgive our debtors* (Mt 6:12). If it

¹⁵ In *De Septem Desertis*, a near contemporary of Hugh of St. Victor, the Abbot Achard of St. Victor, “reduces the means and practice of Christian perfection to seven degrees of self-renunciation, by which he is disposed for the reign of love in his soul. These degrees he otherwise calls seven deserts of the soul” (See Butler). In his *Benjamin Major*, Richard of St. Victor similarly reads “the desert as ... the human heart” and describes how the “soul [is] led by God into the wilderness where it is fed with milk so that it may be inebriated with inward sweetness” (See Richard of St. Victor and Kirchberger).

¹⁶ On Eriugena and Eckhart, see McGinn and Beierwaltes. On the use of the desert in Eckhart and the Beguine mystics, see Dietrich, McGinn, and Asmuth.

¹⁷ One exception is Jaques Derrida.

¹⁸ Conference 18.

rings true, if we are speaking the truth where nobody can see, that is the desert where we can rest in hope.

Because all these troubles are passing away, and what was hope will have become fact, and everything that is ours will be so in fact. Because then we shall finally be transparent to each other [*iam conspicui nobis erimus*] and our thinking will not be a sheep *as it were concealed*. And our consciences will not be a desert [*et non erit eremus conscientia*], because everyone will be known to each other and will not have their thoughts unknown, *when the Lord comes and lights up the things concealed in darkness, and he will reveal the thoughts of the heart, and then everyone will have praise from God* (1 Cor 4:5). But now you see two people in distress, you cannot see their hearts. The conscience of one, perhaps, is being gnawed by pangs of remorse, the other is at rest in conscience, as in the desert.

And they will dwell in the desert in hope, and they will have sleep, that is, quiet with their senses somehow withdrawn from the all the din of the world; inside themselves they will rest *by the streams* (Ez 34:25). In that inner desert [*eremo*] there are certain streams of memory flowing [*manantes*], distilling divine essences from the mind of one who retains and mulls over the scriptures. You see, if you entrust what you have read, what you have heard, in all its purity and freshness [*liquidum*] and holiness to your memory, then when you begin to rest in that interior desert, in a good conscience, it seeps [*eliquator*] from the inner recesses of your mind, and recollection of the word of God starts flowing [*manat*] somehow or other, and you rest with the others in hope, and you say, “Yes, it is true, it is well with me, this is my hope, this is what God has promised me, he does not lie, I have nothing to worry about.” And this freedom from worry is sleep by the streams. *They will have sleep by the streams.* (Augustine)

In this fascinating exegesis, Augustine describes an interior desert that compliments his allegory of the world-as-desert, which understands every Christian to be a pilgrim on a perilous journey back to God (Lindemann 78; Sloterdijk 83). Rather than an external site of trial, the inner desert is the site within our conscience where we “interrogate our faith,” put it to the test, and make sure that it is “not just the lips but the heart uttering.” It symbolizes a retreat from the “desert of the world,” with all of its “storms and trials,” and a movement out of the desert-like *regio dissimilitudinis*,¹⁹ humanity’s fallen state of ontological difference and distance from God (Schmidt 65; Augustine, Sheed, and Foley 7, 10.16).²⁰ While this state may never be overcome completely during a Christian’s lifetime, Augustine makes clear that it is necessary for Christians to cultivate this quiet, restful state of mind in which “streams of memory” gush forth and God’s Word is remembered. These nourishing streams give hope and comfort in a way not unlike the “spring of love” [*fons caritatis*] that the Lord offers all believers who wander thirstily through the world on their way to the heavenly fatherland [*patria*] (Lindemann 78; Migne 35, 2029). In the image of oasal springs of memory, the reader hears not just Neoplatonic rhetoric of emanation, but echoes of the common conception that “the words of God pour forth in a stream from the book into the vessel of memory” (Carruthers 323). As this once dry vessel fills with the nourishing streams of God’s Word, a type of eschatological transparency is attained in which “we will be known to each other” [*iam conspicui nobis erimus*]. Through creative wordplay, this

¹⁹ This translates roughly to “region (or place) of unlikeness.”

²⁰ Schmidt 65; Augustine, *Confessions*. VII 10.16.

near-messianic moment, achieved in the desert forecourt of the coming Kingdom and marked by the future tense verb *erimus* [“we will be”], obviates the otherwise impenetrable desert [*eremus*] of the conscience [*et non erit eremus conscientia*] through the alteration of just one vowel.

As important as Augustine’s placement of this provisional redemption in the desert is his positioning of the mind at prayer. When the mind prays, it “mulls over the scriptures,” that is, it engages in *lectio divina*, the “slow and meditative reading of the Bible” that aimed to bring the reader “into its life and experience, and above all the life and suffering of Jesus” (Jasper 15). As we might expect, Augustine locates this experiential act in the interior desert of the conscience. In this, his rhetoric echoes that of the Desert Fathers, for whom “[t]he monk’s own heart was the new book” (Brown 229). For them and for Augustine, the praying heart and mind not only inhabited, but also became a sort of “desert” that, like Scripture, was read and re-read continuously. As an early example of the mind-as-desert, and the mind-as-book metaphors, Augustine’s sermon shows how closely the desert, mind, and memory were symbolically intertwined in the first centuries of Christianity.

While Augustine presents the desert as the site where the praying mind remembers God’s word and finds hope and freedom from care, other Christian writers of Late Antiquity use the mind-as-desert metaphor to stress the importance of forgetting. More than a site of memory, the desert appears as a place where the praying mind “forgets” itself and the world through imageless prayer. The fourth-century Desert Father Evagrius Ponticus (345-399 AD), for example, warns his monastic readers of the distraction and danger of remembering their close relations and former lives (Evagrius Ponticus and Hausherr 67; Harmless 143-144; Evagrius Ponticus and Sinkewicz 12). As a remedy for these disturbing memories, which comprise a part of the larger “noonday demon of *acedia*,”²¹ Evagrius advocates “passionlessness” [*apatheia*] and the practice of pure, unceasing imageless prayer (Harmless 148–151). Allegorizing the theophany of Exodus 24:9-10, in which Moses, Aaron and the elders of Israel ascend Mount Sinai and see “the place of God”²² under which “there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone,” Evagrius describes the experience of pure prayer as an inner return to Mount Sinai, which is signaled by the mind seeing itself “similar to sapphire or to the color of the sky” (Harmless 152–153). In this inner desert, the illuminated mind forgets all material things, sets aside all representations, and becomes as empty as the desert itself (Evagrius Ponticus 193). In this near-perfect state, the illuminated mind also becomes the interior locus where God dwells, and where a divine encounter is always possible (Harmless 153).

Entering the Latin West through his disciple Cassian, whose *Conferences* and *Institutes* were daily, foundational readings in many monastic communities (Harmless 157), Evagrius’ notion of pure imageless prayer in the desert of the mind continued to reverberate (Cassian and Ramsey 375; 10.6.1.). One prominent medieval voice to engage with this discourse was Meister Eckhart, who also speaks of the soul’s necessity to “forget” itself and all temporal things in order to know God (Forman 139). In sermon 68, for example, Eckhart reminds his audience that God is nearer to us than we are to ourselves, something we often fail to see. For this reason, “[i]f the soul is to know God, then it must forget itself and it must lose itself; for if it knows itself, then it

²¹ *Acedia* was translated by Evagrius’ disciple Cassian as “weariness of the heart” – *taedium cordis* – and by medieval and modern translators respectively as “sloth” and “listlessness.” The author Andrew Solomon understands *acedia* to describe similar symptoms to what is today diagnosed as “depression” (Solomon 293–294).

²² While the Hebrew Bible reads, “they saw the God of Israel”, the Septuagint instead says that Moses and his fellows saw “the place of God.”

doesn't know God" (Eckhart, *Werke* II 38).²³ Through this process of detachment [*abgescheidenheit*] and self-annihilation, the soul "forgets" or "loses" its lower, created part, leaving its higher, uncreated part – its "spark" [*vünkelîn; scintilla animae*], as Eckhart calls it elsewhere (Eckhart, *Werke* II 763–772) – to recognize itself as God's image, and as an indistinct, eternal part of God: "When the soul knows God, then it knows itself and all things in Him" (Eckhart, *Werke* II 38; Largier, *Zeit, Zeitlichkeit, Ewigkeit* 144).²⁴ For Eckhart, the intellect attains this state of knowing or, more rightly, immediate and non-reflexive "unknowing" wherein the soul loses all distinction [*underscheit*] from God, through its higher part, or possible intellect [*intellectus possibilis*] (Eckhart, *Werke* II 786–787; 847). Because the locus of this union lies beyond creation, it can never be adequately expressed through language. It can only be hinted at through privileged figures, such as "Godhead" [*gotheit*], "ground" [*grunt*], and "desert" [*wüeste*] (Manstetten 225–229, 589; Haas 321).

Both Evagrius and Eckhart locate the moment of the soul's self-forgetting, self-(un)knowing and mystical union in the "desert" of the divine. Yet Eckhart also uses the desert figure to indicate a literal utopia, or disontological "non-place" (*ou-topos*) that anticipates certain poststructuralist lines of thought advanced by Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. Based just on a comparison merely of rhetoric, and not of politics, Eckhart's desert "place beyond place" bears a striking resemblance to what Foucault calls a "heterotopia," and what Derrida calls "the beyond as beyond God" (Derrida et al. 64). As Foucault writes in *The Order of Things*,

Utopias afford consolation: although they have no real locality there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold; they open up cities with vast avenues, superbly planted gardens, countries where life is easy, even though the road to them is chimerical. *Heterotopias* are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this *and* that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy 'syntax' in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to 'hold together'. This is why utopias permit fables and discourse: they run with the very grain of language and are part of the fundamental dimension of the *fabula*; heterotopias [...] desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences. (Foucault xviii)

As another name for what Derrida calls "the nameable beyond the name," or "the unnamable nameable" (Derrida et al. 58), the desert is probably the most literal figure for negative theology's "desiccation" of language. Qualifying Foucault slightly, we see that this negative operation very *openly* – not "secretly" – "undermines language" and "contest[s] the very possibility of grammar at its source." In this way, Foucault's concept of the heterotopia anticipates Derrida's thoughts on negative theology's "arid fictionality," or "endless desertification of language," which "tends to denounce images, figures, idols, [and] rhetoric" in describing the "place" beyond God (Derrida et al. 54–56). Borrowing the term from Plato's *Timaeus*, Derrida calls this "placeless" place *khōra*, an utterly indefinable and interstitial space that "displaces and disorganizes all our onto-topological prejudices, in particular the objective

²³ "[S]ol diu sele got bekennen, so muoz si ihr selber vergezzen und muoz sich selber verliesen; wan bekente si sich selber, so enbekente si got niht."

²⁴ "In dem, als sie got bekennet, so bekennet si sich selben und alliu dinc in im."

science of space” (Derrida et al. 56). As both a “figure of [this] pure place” and an image that “denounces” itself, the desert enjoys a privileged status, one attested by its frequent use in works of negative theology. Derrida calls the desert not only “one of the beautiful and most difficult metaphors,” but also a “paradoxical figure of the *aporia*,” representing both the “uncleared way” (one thinks, for example, of a trackless sandy waste), and the condition of action, of “going beyond,” of “striking out” into the desert (Derrida et al. 53–54). However, even this privileged topological metaphor fails to capture the “place” beyond God, which of course lies beyond the reach of language. Derrida stresses this by citing a line from Silesius’ *The Cherubic Wanderer* (*Der Cherubinische Wandersmann*), “Der Ort ist das Wort” [“The Word is the place”]. With this verse Derrida claims that negative theology always “remains at once *in* and *on* language.” In an important sense, then, the word is found “in us,” and it is our task to recognize, “get rid” of, “traverse,” and “forget it by calling” and “recalling it” (Derrida et al. 57–58). This dialectical moment of simultaneous forgetting and recall, which takes place in the “desert” of language, ultimately leaves room for a phenomenological experience of this desert-like “place beyond:” “[B]eyond as beyond God is not a place, but a movement of transcendence that surpasses God himself. [...] [T]ranscendental phenomenology, insofar as it passes through the suspension of all *doxa*, of every positing of existence, of every thesis, inhabits the same element as negative theology” (Derrida et al. 65–67). Harkening back to Eckhart, Derrida speaks of a movement of transcendence that takes place outside of thought and language, and within a pure or transcendental consciousness (Woodruff).

Anticipating Derrida’s *khōra* in certain key respects, Eckhart’s figure of the desert was infinite, empty, and unbounded by time and space [*zit und stat*] (Eckhart, *Werke II* 38, Sermon 68). As such, it was a suitable “aniconic image” (Lane 4) with which to speak of a divine ground of being or the soul that lay beyond all language, thought and categories (Lüers 106, 293–298). As I mentioned at the outset, the desert proved especially apt in this regard because of its “performative” (Sells 3) ability to “renounce” its own “illustrative quality” [*Bildhaftigkeit*], and practice a sort of “linguistic asceticism” by refusing to represent the ineffable (Keller 200). As an empty figure that pointed to the impossibility of figuration (Haas 316–317), the desert was not only a metaphor for all that was beyond names [*für alles der Bezeichenbarkeit Entzogene*], but a “metatopos” for imagelessness in itself [*die Bildlosigkeit an sich*] (Keller 200).

In this chapter, I draw from these allegorical, critical, and historical discourses to examine several medieval texts that most closely approximate my concept of desert writing. In them, the desert appears as a page or writing surface, a figuration both memorial and poetological, since the most common model for human memory “likened it to a tablet or parchment page upon which a person writes” (Carruthers and Ziolkowski 1). As I stated above, the text that fits my definition best is the anonymous 14th century German mystical song, *Granum sinapis*, which has been attributed variously to Eckhart or his followers. But I will also place this text into conversation with several others whose similar desert figurations support my reading of *Granum sinapis*. These are two of Eckhart’s vernacular sermons, Hildebert of Lavardin’s Latin *Vita Sanctae Mariae Egiptiacae* (*Life of St. Mary of Egypt*), and two later vernacular versions of this legend. As I will show, all of these texts express a discourse of the uncreated, impenetrable desert that resists the intellect’s efforts to investigate or inscribe it. By this I mean literally to “track down” [*in-vestigare*], or leave behind metaphorical or poetic “footprints” [*vestigia*]. As I argue, the only writing that may be inscribed in the desert is that of God, or that of divine instruments such as the Egyptian Mary. This is due to the desert’s status as a privileged place within the created world that retains vestiges of God’s uncreatedness

(Eucherius of Lyon 199).²⁵ While all of these texts deploy the desert figure to varying degrees to interrogate the limits of language and memory, *Granum sinapis* most clearly anticipates later texts by Hölderlin and others, which engage in a poetics of sand, dust, and ash.

II: *Granum sinapis*: The Mystical Fruits of the Mustard Seed

Granum sinapis is one of the best-known poems in the medieval German canon to thematize the mystical desert. It was read, and very likely sung in a monastic setting as a hymn of devotion or song of praise (Haug 92). It has eight strophes with ten verses each, and while its dialect features point to composition in Thüringen in central Germany (Radler 479), its authorship is still contested. Some scholars view it as the work of a young Eckhart, although the consensus holds that it was likely composed by a writer well-versed in Eckhart's thought (Radler 479–482; Haas 305; Bindschedler 15). Just as interesting as the question of authorship is the Latin commentary in which the poem has been embedded. This interpretive frame may have served an apologetic function for Eckhart's mystical theology in the years after 1329, when a papal bull censured 28 of 108 of Eckhart's articles as heretical (Haug 84; Köbele 132; Meyer 78–79). It is telling that the commentator nowhere mentions Eckhart by name, but rather “intertwines the Eckhartian poem's radical, speculative mysticism with a more moderate version of speculative Dionysianism as well as a highly affective, ecstatic form of mysticism” (Radler, 471). Thus, as Charlotte Radler writes, “by presenting the reader with the different ‘shades’ of Dionysianism, shades often depicted as being incompatible,” the Latin commentary could make the “Eckhartian message ... appear stabilized, supported and hence more palatable to an audience outside the immediate Eckhartian circle. In this way, Eckhart's mysticism could still remain part of a living tradition and living communities of interpretation” (Radler 472).

As a vessel that preserved Eckhart's mysticism for such communities, the Middle High German poem is especially interesting in its use of the desert figure. While its first three strophes “summarize Eckhart's teaching on the Trinity” (McGinn, *Essential Writings* 293), strophes four through eight deploy the desert to give figure to a place beyond creation and being. There the intellect [*vorstentlichkeit*], having ceased all activity [*werk*] and emptied itself of all created things [*al icht, al nicht*] and images [*bilde*], is urged to go a “pathless path” [*genk âne wek*] and “sink” into the “abyssal flood” [*sink in dî grundelôze flut*] of the “Superessential Goodness” [*uberweseliches gût*]. Despite, or because of these resonances of Eckhart's thought, the poem has been called “a one-sided reduction of Eckhart's concept,” since it mentions neither the soul's divine “spark” coming into contact with the ground of being, nor Eckhart's central idea of the birth of God in the soul (Haug 92; Köbele 131).²⁶ While this is true, critics have underestimated how the text works to produce the emptying of the intellect and divine union that Eckhart calls for in many of his sermons.

This performative aspect comes into focus in strophe four, which urges the reader's intellect to ascend the divine mountain “without activity” [*âne werk*]. This mountain then leads into a “wondrous” desert [*wûste wunderlich*]:

Des puntez berk
stîg âne werk,
vorstentlichkeit!

The mountain of this point
Ascend without activity,
Intellect!

²⁵ The fifth century Bishop Eucherius of Lyon called the desert a “temple of our God without walls.”

²⁶ Haug calls the poem “eine gewisse Vereinseitigung oder Reduktion des Eckhartschen Konzepts.”

der wek dich treit
in eine wûste wunderlîch,
dî breit, dî wît,
unmêzik lît.
dî wûste hat
noch zît noch stat,
ir wîse dî ist sunderlîch.

The way leads you out
Into a wondrous wasteland,
So deep, so wide,
It extends without limit.
The wasteland possesses
Neither time nor place,
Its mode of being is unique.
(McGinn, *Essential Writings* 294)

In addition to declaring the inaccessibility of this desert to the lower intellect (Beierwaltes 247), the poem evokes this aporia through the musicality of its language (Libera and Eckhart 5). This can be heard in the alliterative *wu-* prefix of *wûste wunderlîch*, which draws attention to this underlying phoneme. By allowing the contemplative reader to hear and access this deeper stratum of language, the poem enacts the very resistance to the workings [*werk*] of reason that it calls for. Indeed, the entire song is shot through with such moments (Haug 86), and the evocation of this non-semantic aspect of language is a key component of the text's performative project of "unsaying." This project aims to show the deficiencies of language and reason in the face of God (Haas 317; Köbele 129) and to produce within the reader an affective "metalinguistic experience" of the divine [*cognitio Dei experimentalis*] by converting ineffability into experience (Haas 325; Haug 91; Libera and Eckhart 10–11).²⁷ Strophes five and seven similarly highlight the impenetrable nature of the desert to show the limits and materiality of language. As strophe five puts it,

Daz wûste gût
nî vûz durch wût,
geschaffen sin
quam nî dâ hin.

The wasteland that is Goodness
No foot has trod.
Created understanding
Never enters there.
(McGinn, *Essential Writings* 294)

These lines prefigure the poem's final use of the desert in strophe seven, which calls for an Eckhartian forgetting or annihilation of the self (Eckhart, *Prologi* 3:619).²⁸

Wirt als ein kint
wirt toup, wirt blint!
dîn selbes icht
mûz werden nicht,
al icht, al nicht trîb uber hôr!
lâ stat, lâ zît,
ouch bilde mît!
genk âne wek
den smalen stek,
sô kums du an der wûste spôr.

Become like a child,
Become deaf, become blind!
Your own something
Must become nothing.
Drive away all something, all nothing!
Leave place, leave time,
Avoid images too!
Go out without any path
On the narrow way,
And then you will find the wasteland's hint.
(McGinn, *Essential Writings* 295)

²⁷ Haas, Haug, and Libera all argue that the poem, in particular its final verse, served an affective end.

²⁸ "Obsurdesce igitur, ut audias" ("Become deaf so that you may hear.").

The statement that no creaturely “foot” may enter this “wüste wunderlich” marks the highpoint of the poem’s poetological play. For underpinning this notion is the metaphor of the Book of Creation in which the divine “author” leaves “footprints” [*vestigia*] or traces for human beings to interpret (Blumenberg 51–54; Nobis 957–959; Kohlenberger 959–960). According to this concept of theophany, summed up by Alan of Lille (ca. 1128-1202) in the lines, “Every creature of the world / Is like a book and a picture / And a mirror for us,”²⁹ human beings can “read” visible creation, see God reflected in it, and gain the knowledge to guide themselves back to the divine creator (Bonaventure and Nemmers 73; Eckhart, *Werke I* 114; Curtius 323–329; Foucault 27).³⁰ This is what Hugh of St. Victor means when he writes that all of visible creation is a book written by God’s “finger,” and that each individual creature is a word or sign [*figura*] within this book (Blumenberg 52–53).³¹ By declaring that the superdivine desert resists all human “footprints,” *Granum sinapis* once more makes clear that this desert lies beyond creation, and suggests Eckhart’s teaching that only the uncreated “spark” of the soul may set foot there. But what does the poem say, if anything, about the created desert? What sort of a *figura* or topos might it be?

This question might seem surprising given that *Granum sinapis* presents not a literal but a figurative desert: a speculative wasteland containing “both the imagery of the scriptural *desertum* and Neoplatonist *vastitas (adyton)* [...] in the sense of emptiness” (Williams 52–53). This latter meaning is the same that Eriugena reads when he interprets the desert of John 1:23 and Isaiah 40:3 (*ego vox clamantis in deserto* [Gk: *eremo*]) as “the desert of divine nature, an inexpressible height [*eremia*] removed from all things. It is ‘deserted’ by every creature, because it surpasses all intellect, although it does not ‘desert’ any intellect” (McGinn, “Ocean and Desert” 162). As we have seen, this understanding of the desert informs both *Granum sinapis* and Eckhart’s sermons, in which the desert denotes the divine ground of being or the uncreated part of the soul.

But the question of the created desert is warranted in one key respect. In verse seven, the poem speaks of *der wüste spôr*, an ambiguous phrase that has led many readers to ask what it means for the intellect to reach not the desert itself, but only its “trace” or “trail.” The word *spôr* (Modern German: *Spur*), which renders the Latin word *vestigium* (Grimm et al.), has the literal sense of “trail,” “path,” “track,” or “trace.” But as Walter Haug notes, *spôr* carries the additional meaning of “(linguistic) sign.” For the Latin commentator, the phrase denotes the Neoplatonic realm of pure forms that the intellect can grasp by virtue of its own divine likeness. But in Haug’s reading, *der wüste spôr* calls attention to the desert’s status as a mere word for an ineffable experience of God (Haug 83).³²

As an empty figure that points to the impossibility of figuration, the desert is well suited for such a comment. Its unique status within language makes it a kind of blank page in the Book of Creation. As such, it evokes and preserves something of God’s uncreated nature. While the textual desert found in *Granum sinapis* may offer an entryway into a non-linguistic experience of God, this desert trail brings the soul only so far before grace must lead it the rest of the way. Thus, while the poem’s created desert is inscribed and inscribable, the desert beyond Being

²⁹ “Omnis mundi creatura / Quasi liber et pictura / Nobis est et speculum.”

³⁰ See Eckhart’s Sermon 9: “Der niht dan die crêatûren bekante, der endôrft niemer gedenken ûf keine predige, wan ein ieglichiu crêatûre ist vol gotes und ist ein buoch.”

³¹ Note that in Ex 31:18, the stone tablets of the Covenant received by Moses on Mount Sinai are also said to be “written by the finger of God” (*scriptas digito Dei*).

³² “Alles metaphorische weist letztlich, wie gesagt, auf seine eigene Unzulänglichkeit. Und das gipfelt in der Vorstellung vom weglosen Gehen bis zu jenem schmalen Übergang, der zur Wüste führt, wobei die Wüste aber nur *spôr*, Zeichen, für die Erfahrung des Unerfahrbaren ist.”

resists creaturely efforts at investigation. But what of other efforts? Who, if anyone, may write in the sands of the uncreated desert?

Two of Eckhart's sermons may offer an answer. In sermon sixty, Eckhart speaks of God's desire to lead the soul and all creatures back to an originary state of rest and union in God. To achieve this, the soul must be pure, that is, raised up above and literally deserted of all created things: *wüestunge von allen créatûren*. Eckhart goes on to say that

[s]ô diu sele hoehere gezogen ist über sich, sô si lûterer und klârer ist, so got ie volkomenlîcher in ir gewürken mac in sîn selbes glîchnisse sîn götlich werk. Wühse ein berc von dem ertrîche als hôch als zwô mîle und schriben man dar ûf in stûppe oder in sant buochstaben, sie bliben ganz, daz sie wint noch regen enzerstoerte. Alsô sölte ein rechte geistlich mensche sîn erhaben an einem rechten vride ganz und unwandelhaftic an götlichen werken. Des mac sich ein geistlich mensche wol schamen, daz er sô lihte gewandelt wirt an betrüepnisse und an zorne und an ergerunge: der mensche enwart nie rechte geistlich. (Eckhart, *Werke* 642)

[t]he higher the soul is raised up above herself, the purer and clearer she is, and the more perfectly God can do in her His divine work in His own likeness. If a mountain rose up two leagues above the earth, and if one were to write characters on it in the dust or sand, they would remain intact, untouched by wind or rain. Just so a truly spiritual person should be raised up in true peace, entire and changeless in divine activity. Any spiritual person has good cause for shame at being so easily moved by depression, anger or annoyance: such a person was never truly spiritual. (Eckhart, *Sermons & Treatises Vol. 2*. 17)

Here Eckhart compares the soul at rest in God to a mountain in which letters, written in the dust or sand, remain whole and untouched by wind or rain. As we have already seen in *Granum sinapis*, the mountain and desert can overlap in mystical itineraries, and it is not uncommon for mystical texts to use them interchangeably as figures for God and the soul (Lane 3–4). Because of this, and because Eckhart begins by evoking the desert beyond creation, it is not unreasonable to view the mountain he speaks of as a kind of desert. If we do this, we see that this mountain/desert topos forms a writing surface whose indistinct immutable letters Eckhart likens to the divine work God does in the soul. This striking and likely original³³ analogy invites us to regard this divine work as a kind of inscription in the page of the soul's own uncreated desert. (Eckhart, *Die deutschen Werke* 41).

In sermon sixty-one, Eckhart speaks of a similar heavenly topos with letters written in the sand. Comparing Saint Paul's rapture into the third heaven to the soul's rapture away from earthly things, he says that heaven is constant, pure, and fruitful, and that it contains all things. Thus, he says, "These things should be found in the person, who would be a heaven where God dwells." Citing the gospel parable of the wise man and the fool who built a house upon rock and sand respectively (Mt. 7:24-26), Eckhart likens God and the purified soul to a rock-solid heaven whose stillness permits one to "write letters in sand" without fear of their mutability or erasure:

³³ Josef Quint cites a passage in Albertus Magnus' fifth sermon on Augustus that also describes a mountain landscape raised up "to the third heaven" (*ad tertium caelum*). However, as he writes, "Dieser Vergleichsstelle fehlt allerdings das Moment der auf hohem Berg unverilgbaren Buchstaben [...]. Ich sehe es auch für die vorliegende Stelle als möglich an, daß ... kein Schriftzitat und auch kein meister-Zitat, sondern einer der für Eckhart so charakteristischen konstruierten Vergleiche vorliegt, der sekundär durch den Schreiber des Prototyps unserer handschriftlichen Überlieferung als (Schrift-)Zitat deklariert wurde." See also Eckhart, *Werke II*, 1093, note to 648, 12–15.

Dar umbe sprichet unser herre: “swelch hûs gebûwet ist ûf einen stein, daz envellet niht”. <Diu *schrift* wil,> daz zwô mîle oder drî von dem ertrîche ensî kein regen noch slôze noch wint. Ez ist dâ alsô stille, schribe man dâ buochstaben in sant, sie bliben unversêret ganz. (Eckhart, *Werke II* 648)

Therefore our Lord says, ‘Every house that is built upon a rock will not fall’ (Matth. 7:24). Scripture means that two or three miles above the earth there is neither rain, nor hail, nor wind. It is so still there, that if one were to write letters in the sand, they would remain wholly untouched.

This image bears more than a passing similarity to the raised mountain/desert of sermon sixty. Here Eckhart seems to play with the scriptural associations of rock and sand by applying the former’s more permanent qualities to the latter. God and the elevated soul are so constant, pure and unchanging, he suggests, that any and all distinction dissolves in them. This unchanging state of pure rest is what allows for the mysterious letters to remain untouched by any worldly storm, be it emotional or scriptural.

As for who writes in this heavenly sand, sermon sixty offers a hint. Just as the divine inscribed itself there into the desert of the soul, so it seems here that God also draws these mysterious letters. This reading is supported not just by the ancient and medieval belief in the divine origin of writing, the alphabet and Scripture (Schreiner 59–60; Dornseiff 1–11). We find additional evidence in the way Eckhart collapses the scriptural distinction between rock and sand, thus illustrating the undifferentiated nature of the elevated mountain/desert where, he says “ill and good, joy and pain are all one in God.” Lastly, the idea that the desert can be both page and undifferentiated ground of being is not without theological basis: as the 9th century Neoplatonist Erigena writes, only the divine can work (in this case, write) and be at rest within itself (that is to say, the desert) in a state of dialectical self-relation (Beierwaltes 244).

One may object here by noting that the history of writing is in many ways the history of sand (Welland 68). It is quite possible that Eckhart’s audience used tables of sand and wax for composition and calculation. They would certainly have known the Gospel scene (John 8:6–8) where Christ instructs his disciples by writing in the sand. Eckhart could, therefore, have drawn on these shared cultural practices and knowledge to make his thoughts on the still and unchangeable nature of God, heaven, and the soul more concrete. This may have indeed been the case. But the claim that these sermons suggest a divine author whose preferred page is the desert becomes more tenable when we place them within a contemporary literary context. For this I have chosen as representative the popular legend of Saint Mary of Egypt.

III: The Egyptian Mary and Her Divine Desert Page

The sixth-century patriarch of Jerusalem, Sophronius, was the first to compile the many legends of the Egyptian Mary, and his Greek *vita* was widely read by Christians in both eastern and western churches (Williams-Krapp 372; Coon 84). Latin translations of this text can be found in over ninety extant manuscripts beginning in the ninth century, above all in Spain, France, and Italy, and later, from the eleventh century on, in Southern Germany. This reception led to numerous translations in almost every European vernacular (Kunze, “*Maria Aegyptiaca*” 1252).

One of the most copied Latin versions of Mary's life in the German lands is that of the 11th century reformer and bishop Hildebert of Lavardin (1056-1133 CE) (Williams-Krapp 373). At the start of his poem, the elder monk Zosimas decides to leave his monastery because he believes he has "surpassed the ways of his teachers" (Pepin et al. 73). Warning him not to succumb to the sin of pride [*superbia*] (Pepin et al. 75), his abbot instructs Zosimas to join a more remote community of anchorites whose members enter the desert for up to forty days in search of "new battles" [*nova bella*] and new ways to imitate Christ (Pepin et al. 79). Shortly after joining them, Zosimas too enters the desert to observe this rule. But not long after parting ways with the other monks, Zosimas is compelled to pray for a companion "[w]ho might assuage his cares and also suffer them, / who might instruct / Him by actions and by overcoming teach him to overcome [*superare*]". Soon his prayer is answered in the form of a spectral blur running through his field of vision. Chasing down this "phantom," Zosimas confronts not a ghost but a woman, who although "black from the sun, bent by old age, / Hairy in her exposed parts, [and] uncovered in parts that should be covered," is said to surpass him "as with her foot, so with her life" (Pepin et al. 81).

The strong feelings the two develop for each other stem in part from mutual dependency: Zosimas needs her blessing and spiritual instruction; Mary the holy sacraments that only he can give her. These sentiments are made clear after Mary's death when Zosimas discovers the saint's uncorrupted body in the desert. Grieving as though he has lost a lover, Zosimas laments that he never learned her name. To his relief he finds the following message written in the sand:

'Sancte pater, Pharie sepeli, precor, ossa Marie!
Gleba recondatur, cineri cinis adiciatur.' [...]
His Zosimas demum nomenque diemque supremum
Agnoscit dubius, quis conditor extitit huius.
Nam nil legisse mulierem, nil didicisse
Nouerat istorum nec uel memorem studiorum.
(Hildebert and Larsen 292–293)
[833–845]

'Holy Father, I ask that the bones of Mary
the / Egyptian be interred; / Let her be
buried in the soil, let / her ashes be added
to ashes.' [...] By these words doubtful
Zosimas finally recognized / Her name
and her last day. Who was the author of
this writing? / For he knew that the
woman had read nothing, had learned /
Nothing of these studies, nor was she even
/ mindful of them. (Pepin et al. 111–112)

Given her illiteracy, Mary's ability to write is yet another miracle born of her ascetic perfection (Hildebert and Kouli 91), and further proof of the deification she has attained after years of penitence. Her embodiment as a site where heaven and earth converge, and as an author both human and divine, is made even more evident by the miracles that attend the discovery of her body, which is transported "in a moment" to the spot it takes Zosimas thirty days to reach.

The young monk's desperate trek through the trackless waste in search of his beloved Mary, for whom the desert is said to be "a house" [*cui casa desertum*] (Pepin et al. 110; Hildebert and Larsen 290), occurs a year after the two last meet under the moonlight on the bank of the river Jordan. There Zosimas hears Mary's confession and gives her communion. At the end of their meeting, Mary instructs Zosimas in proper monastic care and discipline before walking "with dry feet" back across the water (Pepin et al. 109). Yet shortly after his return to the monastery, Zosimas is haunted by the memory of Mary, who has become the source of his hope and the object of intense desire [*quam volo, quam quero, cuius prece celica spero*] (Hildebert and Larsen 290). After a year that seems to pass too slowly, Zosimas goes in search of

the saint, but unfortunately she has left no footprints in the desert (Hildebert and Larsen 291). It is only after he prays for help that Zosimas sees a ray of light that leads him to Mary's body and her message inscribed in the sand.

The at once earthly and divine provenance of this writing is more pronounced in the vernacular. A thirteenth century Spanish verse translation, for example, calls the letters "very clear and well formed / Because they were formed in heaven." What is more, Zosimas can read them easily because they appear "[a]s if they were on parchment" (Pepin et al. 157; Alvar 104). Here the desert appears as a clean writing surface in which the miraculous letters remain preserved in the shifting sands for a year. Indeed, as a contemporary French version has it, the letters appear as though written the very same day [*com se fussent faites cil jor*] (Alvar 145). And perhaps most striking is an early 16th century German verse translation,³⁴ in which God addresses Zosimas thus:

‘Hoerest du, Zosima, / Das vor dir uff der
erden da / Stet geschriben, des nem war!’ [...]
Alsus stunden die buchstaben: / ‘Zosima, du
solt begraben / Mariam, die hie lyt dot. / Got
von hymnell dir das gebot.’
(Kunze, *Die Legende der heiligen Maria
Aegyptiaca* 139–140)

‘Listen, Zosimas, / That which stands before
you there written on the ground / Take heed!
[...] There stood the letters: / ‘Zosimas, you
should bury / Mary who lies here dead. / God
of heaven commanded you this.’

This is the only version of the Mary legend I have found to contain these unique features. It exists in only one manuscript (MS Praed. 91 of the Stadt- und Universitätsbibliothek Frankfurt), which once belonged to the Dominican monastery of Frankfurt. It is believed to be a translation of the 9th century vita of Paulus Diaconus, who introduced the legend of Mary into the Latin West (Kunze, *Studien* 26–27). However, in that particular version, Zosimas neither hears God's voice, nor is the message in the sand written in the third person. On the contrary, Mary asks Zosimas to pray "for me" [*Ora tantum pro me propter Dominum*] (Migne 73:688). It is possible, then, that the 16th century author or scribe could have drawn on an understanding of the desert as God's page that was unique to Dominican circles. This would raise the question whether the text's novelties are creative additions unique to it alone, or whether they echo a version of the legend that Eckhart could have known. Until further manuscript evidence is found, the answers to these questions must remain unanswered.

What is clear, however, is that Mary's desert is not just a page bearing a divine message. It is a real place that transforms her into a perfect imitator of Christ and, just as miraculous, into the author of her own life. The literalness of her desert distinguishes it from Eckhart's more speculative wasteland, whose indistinct letters only God and the soul can read. In both cases, however, the desert is very much God's page: vast enough to dissolve its contradictions, and fruitful enough to belie its literal barrenness.

IV: Conclusion

The notion of the desert as divine page, existing both "outside" in the created world and inside the uncreated part of the soul, is directly informed by the medieval metaphor of the "book of life," which contains the names of those who will enjoy eternal salvation (Nobis 956).

³⁴ This version is entitled *Zosimas geschicht* (*The Story of Zosimas*).

Eckhart, for example, speaks of this “living book” [*lebenden buoche*] in sermon eighty-six. There he offers the following reading of Luke 10:41 in which Jesus calls Martha twice by name: “By Christ’s ‘calling’ I mean his eternal knowing: being infallibly inscribed, before the creation of creatures, in the living book of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost” (Eckhart and Walshe 84–85; Eckhart, *Werke II* 212).³⁵ For Eckhart, those like Martha, Moses and Nathaniel whom Christ/God calls by name “were never, nor will ever be lost” [*noch niemer enwart noch enwirt verlorn*].

With respect to the rhetorical link between memory and the desert, this passage has several important implications. When Christ names Martha “through his human mouth from the eternal Word” [*durch menschlichen munt ûz dem êwigen worte*] (Eckhart, *Werke II* 214), he reads her name, as it were, out of the book of *himself* – that is, as it stands written on his own uncreated “desert page.” This book – i.e., Christ as Word before He became flesh (John 1:14) – exists “in the beginning” (John 1:1), not only as a record of those who will be saved, but also as an archive of all things that will come into being through Him: “He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him not one thing came into being which has come into being” (John 1: 2–3). This includes the Son as Word, which is of the same perfect nature as the Father (Eckhart, *Werke II* 492). As the divine *logos* or idea [*ratio*], the Son is the “Word in the beginning” [*verbum in principio*] and the first cause of everything (Eckhart, *Werke II* 498).

Since he contains all things within Himself, God thus forms a vast storehouse, or memory. Augustine is probably one of the first and best-known writers to posit a correspondence between memory and God the Father. Yet just as the Persons of the Trinity are one God, so too are memory [Father], understanding [Son] and will [Holy Spirit] all one mind (Teske 155). As Augustine writes in *De Trinitate*, “When these three are gathered [*coguntur*] into one, it is called thought [*cogitatio*] from this being gathered together [*coactu*]” (Augustine and Kreuzer 11.3.6). Here, as he does in the *Confessions* (10.11.8), Augustine links the verbs for thought [*cogito*] and gathering [*cogo*]. This etymological reading reflects his idea that “the mind is the memory itself,” or at least that as the exercise of mind, memory is “at times indistinguishable from it” (Augustine, Sheed, and Foley 200, 10.14.21). Put another way, thinking is for Augustine at times indistinguishable from the “re-collection” or “re-gathering” [*re-colligo*] of memories into a reconstituted “presence at hand” (Krell 54).

Augustine’s notion of the mind as memory and Eckhart’s thoughts on the “living book” increase our understanding of the texts we have discussed up to now. As we have seen, Eckhart’s moment of self-forgetting and self-annihilation transcends all representational thought, and thus – according to Augustine – all memory. Although this moment of oblivion takes place by necessity in and through the intellect, it does so in the intellect’s uncreated “desert” – the direct pendant to God’s own (uncreated) desert, with which it communicates in an act of mutual inscription. In one direction, God inscribes the names of those like Martha who are “named by name” into the “book of life,” i.e. into God Himself. In the other direction, God inscribes Himself in a moment of gracious self-communication and transcendent union into the souls of those – like Martha – who strip away all creaturely things and “loosen themselves from time” [*Die zît loesen*] (Eckhart, *Werke II* 216). At stake in both cases is a kind of writing that both moves beyond and yet remains bound to memory and thought.

That such writing may rightly be called “desert writing” is supported not only by Eckhart and others’ use of the desert figure, but also by Saint Mary of Egypt’s *Vita*. This text represents

³⁵ “‘Nennen-Kristî’ heize ich sîn êwigez wizen, unbetrogenliche stân êwicliche vor geschepfede aller créatûren in dem lebenden buoche ‘vater-sun-und-heilic-geist.’”

one of the earliest and clearest depictions of the desert as divine page – as the place where God leaves a legible trace [*spôr*] for humans to read and follow. In the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* this is very literal: Zosimas reads Mary’s name and instructions for her burial. In *Granum sinapis* and Eckhart’s sermons, the traces God leaves are literal in that they occur in and through language [*der wüste spôr*]; but they are also non-literal in that they demand a movement beyond God and language. As Derrida writes, “the beyond as beyond God is not a place, but a movement of transcendence that surpasses God himself, being, essence, the proper or the self-same, the *Selbst* or *Self* of God, [and] the divinity of God [...]” (Derrida et al. 64). To illustrate this point, Derrida quotes the 17th century Catholic mystic Angelus Silesius’s poem, “One Must Go beyond God” (“Man muß noch über Gott”) from his collection of aphoristic verse, *The Cherubic Wanderer* (*Cherubinischer Wandersmann*):

Wo ist mein Aufenthalt? Wo ich und du nicht stehen.
 Wo ist mein letztes End, in welches ich soll gehen?
 Da, wo man keines findt. Wo soll ich denn nun hin?
 Ich muß noch über Gott in eine Wüste ziehn. (Angelus Silesius 1,7)

Where is my dwelling place? Where I and you can never stand.
 Where is my final goal, toward which I should ascend?
 It is beyond all place. What should my quest then be?
 I must, transcending God, into a desert flee.
 (Angelus Silesius, Shradly, and Schmidt 39 (translation modified))

In a manner that recalls both *Granum sinapis* and Eckhart’s sermons, Silesius figures the “beyond as beyond God” as a desert – the “non-place” of which only a trace [*spôr*] remains for us to follow. In *Granum sinapis*, this trace is a signpost that directs the mind at prayer to enter the “place beyond place,” “to go where [*wo, Ort, Wort*] it is impossible to go” (Derrida et al. 59). The tension underpinning this movement of transcendence is that while it “remains at once *in* and *on* language” (Silesius: “The place is the Word” [“Der Ort ist das Wort”]), it can only occur, or literally “take place” in the reader’s affective experience. This experience is textually producible but ultimately indescribable. *Granum sinapis* may be read as a springboard into such an experience. Its final strophe, both an appeal and a response to the overwhelming pleasure of the “superessential goodness” [*ô uberwesentliches gût!*], opens up into an ecstatic experience in which the speaker’s self is annihilated in “God’s nothingness” [*sink al mîn icht / in gotes nicht*].³⁶ The textual production of such moments constitutes the force of such desert writing, which inhabits a gray zone between exemplarity and “arid formalization” (Derrida et al. 80). Desert writing, which in this instance falls under the larger mantle of negative theology, is exemplary insofar as it is aware of its own “desiccation.” By this, I mean it is aware of its limits, failures and formal emptiness, all of which make it optimal for representing the unnamable and the “untreatable” (Derrida et al. 80). While this paradoxical logic may frustrate the rational mind, it opens up room for an affective experience of the divine. Derrida underscores precisely this when he puns on the words “desert” and “desire,” *désert* and *désir*, which are near-homonyms in French. As he puts it, the desert “is the other name, if not the proper place, of desire” (Derrida et al. 80). For Eckhart and the anonymous author of *Granum sinapis*, this desire is for God – or,

³⁶ In this respect, it exemplifies a text that blends both affective and speculative union.

more precisely, “the beyond as beyond God.” The desert of their desire is at once textual and not; accessible (through its “trace” [*spôr*]) and not; describable and not. Expressed (somewhat problematically) in spatial terms, the desert is an “enigmatic place” (Derrida et al. 75). It is full of paradox, yes, but also contains a clear and consistent logic. It is where one must go even though one cannot: *Geh hin, wo du nicht kannst* (Angelus Silesius 1, 99 “Gott außer Kreatur”). As such, it gives figure to a belief in the power of language and words that at the same time acknowledges and celebrates their limits.

While this belief might be said to be held by every poet, it takes on special significance within the Christian tradition where Christ, as the incarnated divine *logos*, makes God intelligible to humanity and acts as mediator between heaven and earth. As the core of Christian faith and practice, this belief has given rise to centuries of speculative thought and textual production. In the next chapter, I take up a modern German poet who not only made one of his central concerns the subject of Christ as mediator between God and man; he also cultivated a poetic voice that staged itself as a such a mediator. I speak here, of course, of Hölderlin. As I will show, Hölderlin’s figurations of the desert harken to those in the mystical texts discussed above, yet they serve different ends. Whether consciously evoked or not, the echoes they contain reverberate across time and space and inform our understanding of Hölderlin’s distinct desert writing.

Chapter 2

“But a trace remains, / Yes, a trace of a word, which a man seizes:” Hölderlin’s Desert Writing in *Der Einzige* and *Hyperion*

While the desert has long been recognized as a central image in Hölderlin’s work, few critics have examined the desert’s relation to Hölderlin’s conceptions of memory and poeology. Among these, Cori Mackrodt stands out for two studies on the hymn *Der Einzige* (Mackrodt, *Aufbrechende Schrift*; Mackrodt, “Wüste – Kleeblatt – Abgrund”). Yet even in her meticulous analysis of the poetological aspects of that text’s desert, Mackrodt remains constrained by the limits of her own scope, failing to draw connections between the desert’s “geopoetological” (Mackrodt, *Aufbrechende Schrift*) role in *Der Einzige* and its similar function in other works by Hölderlin.

In this chapter, I seek to fill this gap in the scholarship by applying Mackrodt’s insights on the desert in *Der Einzige* to an earlier work in which the desert appears with some frequency. This is the novel *Hyperion, oder Der Eremit in Griechenland* (*Hyperion, or The Hermit in Greece*) (1797/99). That the desert plays such an important role in this epistolary novel, itself a key moment for Hölderlin’s poetological reflection, is no accident; indeed, there is something inherently poetological about Hölderlin’s use of the desert trope. Comparing each text’s respective conception of the desert will thus offer a fuller account of Hölderlin’s desert writing and any changes it might undergo over time. To establish a basis for my comparison, I pose two sets of related questions. The first is: How does each text not only contain the desert as a figure, but also *embody* the desert as its constitutive material? That is, how does each text posit its own language as a “desert” and its words as “grains of sand?” The second is: How should we place each text’s respective understanding of language as a desert within Hölderlin’s larger project of poetic remembrance or commemoration [*Andenken*]? In other words, how are Hölderlin’s deserts also ones of memory?

To frame these latter questions, I should first say something about Hölderlin’s conception of memory. According to Gabriel Trop, Hölderlin understood memory as a cognitive act that bears more resemblance to Husserlian retention than to Platonic *anamnesis*, “an elegiac remembrance of a lost relation to nature, or even a concrete memory associated with an intentional object.” What Hölderlin prizes in the act of memory is its power to bind disparate temporal moments and thereby secure the possibility of an ontological unity. In this way, Hölderlin’s later verse, with its difficult syntax and long conditional phrases, can be read as “perhaps the most extreme of poetic experiments” with cognitive retention, stretching the limits of retention at the same moment in which it proclaims its centrality (Trop 61).

This idea that Hölderlin understood memory as “less a relationship to the past than a focusing of the present, a concatenation of multiplicity in one and the same cognitive landscape” (Trop 62), prompts a number of questions that this chapter will seek to answer. The first asks whether *Der Einzige* and *Hyperion* can rightly be called “poetic experiment[s] with cognitive retention.” The second asks whether the desert in each text might give figure to a similar “cognitive landscape;” and if so, does it enjoy a place of privilege among Hölderlin’s arsenal of figures?

As I argued in Chapter One, the figurations of the desert-as-memory and the desert-as-page have a long, intertwined history in the Christian West. In this chapter, I seek to shed light

on Hölderlin's particular deployment of this rhetorical tradition and to pinpoint his contributions to it. As I mention above, I am particularly interested in how the desert works within Hölderlin's project to attune the poetic spirit "to natural self-organization through a regime of cognitive exercises" (Trop 62–64). For if we read *Der Einzige* and *Hyperion*, at least in part, as exercises in memory and retention, we may then ask questions that get to the heart of Hölderlin's poetics and poetology. These include how each text might hint at the possible, but always "indeterminate" (Trop 65) moment of reconciliation between human beings themselves and between the divine and the human, and what might be the desert's role, if any, in this reconciliation.

In its various drafts, *Der Einzige* appears to offer at least provisional answers to these questions. In them, the desert is a site of reconciliation between Christ and the antique demigods Heracles and Bacchus, who are all said to share the same divine father. And yet as Jean-François Courtine argues, this indeterminate moment of "brotherly" syncretism is highly fraught, as it stems from the poet's difficult task "to find the measure [...] that founds and authorizes the comparison between Christ, the Only One, and the other gods or demigods" (Courtine 121). This standard reading is based on the verses,

<p>Nie treff ich, wie ich wünsche, Das Maas[,] (Hölderlin, Sattler, and Ross 8: 651)</p>	<p>Never do I strike, as I would wish, The measure[,]</p>
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a measure that, as Ruth-Eva Schulz writes, can only come as a "divine gift" from "above" (Schulz 240). Critics who share this view find further evidence for the poet's lack of measure in the verses immediately preceding:

<p>Es hänget aber an Einem Die Liebe. Diesesmal Ist nemlich vom eigenen Herzen Zu sehr gegangen der Gesang, Gut will ich aber machen Den Fehl, mit nächstem Wenn ich noch andere singe. (Hölderlin, Sattler, and Ross 8: 651)</p>	<p>To One alone, however, Love clings. For this time too much From my own heart the song Has come; if other songs follow I'll make amends for the fault. (Hölderlin, <i>Poems and Fragments</i> 539)</p>
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For many, the simple fact that Hölderlin composed this poetic "failure" [*Fehl*] over a three-year period (1802-1805) after his return from Bordeaux supports the common interpretation of this "homecoming." As Trop writes, Hölderlin's return from France marked a turning point after which "the inevitable facticity of violence and instability [...] undermined the hopes he had placed in his poetological methodology. What he sought to secure through language – evidence for the self-organization of the totality of Being – receded further into the sphere of improbability" (Trop 74).

And yet as Mackrodt argues in the more recent of her two studies, the manuscripts that comprise *Der Einzige* can be seen to obviate the question of "success" or "failure." For Mackrodt, this hymn is much more of an editorial and hermeneutic "riddle" [*Rätsel*] than a fixed or completed "work" [*Werk*]. Its manuscript drafts can be arranged and "staged" [*inszeniert*] to form a plurality of possible "writings" [*Schriften*]. What is at stake in, and built *into* the drafts of

Der Einzige is thus not only synthesis, unity, and decidability, but also ambiguity, difference, and undecidability; their logic is not one of “either/or,” but rather “both/and.” In this way, Mackrodt solves the editorial “riddle” by not solving it at all; that is, by reading undecidability and constitutive ambiguity as the very essence of *Der Einzige*.

What makes Mackrodt’s reading so valuable is its ability to open up new possibilities to think about Hölderlin’s poetry and poetology. Her geopoetological understanding of the desert, in particular, has prompted me to ask whether *Der Einzige* might contain any traces of Hölderlin’s earlier hopes in his poetological methodology. If it does, how then might these hopes compare with those found in earlier works, such as *Hyperion*, written before Hölderlin’s trip to France? One way to answer these questions is by comparing each text’s figurations of the desert. While this may seem an arbitrary yardstick, the desert’s geopoetological importance in Hölderlin’s work justifies such an approach.

I begin with a reading of *Der Einzige* not simply because it is the lens through which I read *Hyperion*; I do so also to draw out a thread of continuity between this and the previous chapter. In the latest drafts of *Der Einzige*, the desert appears as the site where Christ stands alone “under visible heaven and star” [*unter sichtbarem Himmel und Gestirn*] and resists the Empedoklean temptation “to cheer himself away” [*hinwegjauchzen*] from the earth and to leave it “bare” [*entblößet*]. The verses that follow make clear not only what “holds” [*hält*] Christ and the poet to the earth, but also state where this act of “holding” takes place:

[...] Nemlich immer jauchzet
die Welt

Hinweg von dieser Erde, daß sie die
Entblößet; wo das Menschliche sie nicht hält. Es bleibet aber eine Spur
Doch eines Wortes; die ein Mann erhaschet. Der Ort war aber

Die Wüste. (Hölderlin, Sattler, and Ross 8: 795)

[...] Namely always the world cheers
itself away from this earth, such that it makes the earth
Bare; where the human does not hold it. But a trace remains,
Yes, a trace of a word, which a man seizes. The place, however, was

The desert.

Here, in a manner that recalls the “trace” left in the desert of *Granum sinapis*, Hölderlin inscribes the desert with a “trace of a word.” The “seizure” of this trace by Christ and the poet alike is the very precondition of speech and writing. The desert thus becomes a place not only of poetic production, but also of two types of memory. The first is the textual memory of the words spoken and written there before (e.g. Christ’s, the Israelites’ etc.). Like grains of sand, these have been arranged, effaced, re-arranged and re-effaced from the desert page over time and throughout history. The second type of memory is the cognitive act of remembrance that the hymn aims to activate and which “designates the capacity to hold multiple – contradictory and complementary – tones in one and the same cognitive space.” As a “power that binds disparate temporal moments,” this cognitive faculty “secures the existence of an ontological unity” (Trop

61), manifesting this “in a moment of presence, and by extension, in the poetic word and the consciousness that listens to it” (Trop 62).

By pointing out these rhetorical similarities, I by no means overlook the substantial differences between Hölderlin’s hymn and *Granum sinapis*. Perhaps most importantly, “Hölderlin’s poetological reflections [...] do not constitute a system in which one intuits the divine through some inexplicable, mystical form of cognition, but rather from the implicit cognitive organization present in the act of linguistic receptivity and creativity” (Trop 68). Nevertheless, like its medieval precursor, *Der Einzige* does attempt to produce an experience within the reader’s mind and body. It does this by creating a “space in which both gods and mortals commingle,” a space that “does not appear *in* language but *through* language, in the gaps of the poetic space itself as the locus of remembrance (*Erinnerung*)” (Trop 66). In this way, it shares something essential with *Granum sinapis*, which concludes with an intimation of ecstatic union with “the beyond as beyond God.” Like the gaps in Hölderlin’s poetic space, the “placeless place” evoked by the final lines is both a remembered and experiential space outside of language that is nevertheless textually producible.

From its final evocation and intimation of mystical union, *Granum sinapis* suggests that it was read or sung in order to produce an experiential knowledge of God [*cognitio Dei experimentalis*]. In this sense, it is possible to speak of this text as a “success.” But what kind of “success,” if any, is Hölderlin’s hymn? Should we even speak of it in these terms? If we set these questions aside and simply read the text, we see indications of what might be called “failure” and “breakdown.” Firstly, we see that the latest drafts trail off seemingly unfinished, with the conjunctions *aber* [“but”] and *oder* [“or”] piling up not unlike grains of sand in the desert. While the “accumulation” of these markers of difference and possibility could suggest the poet losing his way, as it were, in a “desert” of signifiers, such a pile up can alternatively be read as evidence of a “poetology of *Scheitern*” (Mackrodt, *Aufbrechende Schrift* 337–343). If the task of such a poetology is, as Mackrodt writes, “sich immer weiter in die Differenzen einzuwenden und über diese Bewegung das Gedicht zu fügen” (“to counter itself always further into differences and to construct the poem by means of this movement”) (Mackrodt 337), then the disproportionate use of *aber* and *oder* would suit the poet’s task to express undecidability and “differential unity,” and to constitute a poem by these means. Before we examine this claim any further, however, let us take a closer look at the “riddle” that is *Der Einzige*.

I: The Desert as *Aber-* and *Oder-Ort*

In his study and editorial reconstruction of *Der Einzige*, Emery George, writes that it is “Hölderlin’s only late hymn of which no definitive version is known” (George 25). This is still the case despite Beissner’s arrangement of the manuscripts into three distinct versions [*Fassungen*] in the *Große Stuttgarter Ausgabe*. Despite their uncertainty surrounding the final form, editors at least agree on the chronology of the four main manuscript drafts. It is the latest of these (313/1–4 and 337/1–2) that interest me and to which I now turn. In them, the desert [*die Wüste*] appears as the place [*der Ort*] where the poet brings Christ together with two of his typological prefigurations: the demi-gods Heracles and Bacchus.

In large part because this moment occurs in the desert, Mackrodt and Hans-Jost Frei read the desert poetologically as the “place of writing” [*Schriftort*], the so-called “non-place” [*Un-ort*] of difference and the written word (Mackrodt, “Wüste – Kleeblatt – Abgrund” 197–198; Frey 106). Their interpretations, which are in line with Monica Schmitz-Emans’s reading of the desert

as a poetological figure in the texts of Kafka, Celan, Jabes and others (Schmitz-Emans), are compelling in their insistence on the unresolved tensions that *Der Einzige* produces. These can be seen not only in the fraught relationship between the three central metaphors of the desert, the clover leaf [*das Kleeblatt*], and the abyss [*der Abgrund*], which the poet uses to express the unity and difference between Christ, Heracles and Bacchus; they are also evidenced by the fragmentary nature of the hymn itself.

One reason why this moment of differential unity appears to be so wracked by tension is because the poet admits both shame and pleasure at comparing the two pagan demi-gods to Christ (Hölderlin, Sattler, and Ross 8: 789; 791).³⁷ His mixed feelings echo the central question posed three years earlier in the hymn *Wie wenn am Feiertage* (*As on a holiday*), namely, how to sing about Christ with the proper humility. Just as in that hymn the poet called himself a “false priest” [*falschen Priester*] (Hölderlin, Sattler, and Ross 8: 559), in *Der Einzige* he grapples with a similar doubt about his ability to mediate and give shape to the divine Word. These doubts stem in large part from the awareness that language is an imperfect medium for such a task. And yet, as the poet says, this difficult mediation is only possible in language: *Mittelbar / In heiligen Schriften* [“Mediated / In holy writings”] (Hölderlin, Sattler, and Ross 8: 791; Kreuzer 112). These “holy writings” refer of course both to Christian Scripture and Hölderlin’s own poetry. In this sense, both Christ and the poet are mediating figures. Christ is the “last mediator who fulfills mediation to its most extreme limit” by assuming the earthly human condition. The poet is the “spiritual” [*geistlich*] being who is also “of the world” [*weltlich*]. It falls to him “to keep the letter with care” (Courtine 140; Hölderlin, Sattler, and Ross 8: 675).³⁸ Hölderlin viewed this care for the letter as a divine service (Courtine 140; Hölderlin, Sattler, and Ross 8: 556),³⁹ and such care was all the more urgent in his own “Hesperian” age of the “fled gods” [*der entflohenen Götter*] (Hölderlin, Sattler, and Ross 6: 252). This was an epoch in which transcendence is no longer transmitted and mediated through a heroic demigod, but rather through the “objectivation of consciousness” (i.e. “the spirit”) in and by means of writing. This writing – be it in the “lines and middle rooms” of nature (*Griechenland*, 3. version), or be it as writing in an emphatic sense, i.e. in holy scripture – preserves and entrusts to our reading the withdrawn presence of God (Kreuzer 366).⁴⁰ The existential condition of this hermeneutic age explains the stress Hölderlin, particularly in his poetological writings, places on the cognitive acts of listening, reading, remembering, and writing.

It has already been observed that Hölderlin’s later hymns stretch the limits of cognitive retention in order to “[test] the human capacity to ‘hold’ a memory” and to “[attune] the poetic spirit to natural self-organization” (Trop 64). This project has as its goal the creation of a cognitive space within the reader’s mind in which “a *temporary* state of *imagined* reconciliation

³⁷ 313/3, 62–64: “Es hindert aber eine Schaam / Mich dir zu vergleichen / Die weltlichen Männer.” 337/2, 22–23: “Schön / Und lieblich ist es zu vergleichen.”

³⁸ “Am meisten, daß gepflegt werde / Der veste Buchstab” (*Patmos*).

³⁹ “Ihr Dichter! mit entblößtem Haupte zu stehen / Des Vaters Stral, ihn selbst, mit eigner Hand / Zu fassen und dem Volk ins Lied / Gehüllt die himmlische Gaabe zu reichen” (*Wie wenn am Feiertage*).

⁴⁰ “[D]ie Gestalt der Transzendenz im geschichtlichen Alltag [wird] nicht mehr durch einen halbgöttlichen, heroischen Vermittler [vermittelt], sondern durch die Objektivation des Bewußtseins (des “Geistes”) in der und vermittels der Schrift, die, sei es in den “Linien und Winkeln” der Natur (*Griechenland*, 3. Fassung, StA 2.1, 258, V.33; MA 1, 479, V. 33), sei es als Schrift im emphatischen Sinne, in den heiligen Texten also, die zurückgezogene Präsenz Gottes bewahrt und unserem Lesen überantwortet.” My decision to translate *Winkeln* as “middle rooms” follows Mackrodt’s claim that *Winkeln* refers to the “between-space” [*Zwischenraum*] Hölderlin’s text attempts to open. See Mackrodt, *Aufbrechende Schrift*, 40.

Die Zeichen jene an sich haben. Denn es hat noch anders, rätlich,
 Gesorget der Donnerer. Christus **aber** bescheidet sich selbst.
 Wie Fürsten ist Herkules. Gemeingeist Bacchus. Christus **aber** ist
 Das Ende. Wohl ist der noch anderer Natur; erfüllet **aber**
 Was noch an Gegenwart
 Der Himmlischen gefehlet an der andern. Diesesmal , oft **aber**
 (Hölderlin, Sattler, and Ross 8: 800–801)

[...] But often a great man
 Seems not to be suited together
 To a great man. All days they stand, however, as at an abyss one
 Next to the other. But these three
 Are this, that under the Sun
 They are like hunters of the hunt, or
 A man of the field, who breathing hard from his work
 Bares his head, or like a beggar. Beautiful
 And pleasing it is to compare. The earth
 Does good. To cool. But always are there
 Other heroes. But the struggle is that this one
 Tempts me, so that by necessity as sons of God
 those ones bear the signs upon themselves. For the Thunderer
 Provided entirely otherwise. But Christ concedes himself.
 As a prince is Hercules. Communal spirit Bacchus. But Christ is
 The End. He is surely of another nature; but he fulfills
 What is lacking in the presence
 Of the Heavenly ones in that of the others. This time , but often⁴²

Through the use of the first *aber*, the poet reiterates the difficulty and potential unsuitability of his attempt to bring together the three demigods in the “desert” of his text. Yet immediately after expressing doubt in this attempt, the poet deploys a second *aber*, which introduces the image of an “abyss” [*Abgrund*]. This is a unifying trope in as much as Christ, Heracles, and Bacchus are said to stand at its precipice, “all days, ... one / Next to the other.” The third *aber* strengthens this abyssal image of unity-in-difference still further by reintroducing the desert, the place “under the sun,” where the three stand as “equals” [*So sind jene sich gleich*]. Yet even this clear movement from difference and undecidability towards unity and decidability is complicated by the verses that follow. These introduce an element of ambiguity through the plural verb *sind* [“are”] and the word *Jäger* [“hunter”], which has the same form in the nominative singular and plural. With *sind* coming after *Jäger*, and with *Jäger* lacking any article, it is not only possible, but also makes good grammatical sense to read the line as: “they are under the sun / Like hunters of the hunt.” And yet the following verses suggest that the verb *sind* works just as well with *unter der Sonne*, and that *Jäger* refers in a strict sense to Heracles alone, just as *Akersmann* refers to Bacchus and *Bettler* to Christ. In this manner, the poem demands a cognitive operation whereby the reader must accept the ambiguity of an inclusive “both/and” logic.

This inclusive logic is extended through the use of the conjunction *oder*, which can express possibility, exclusion, and inclusion. As the reader’s attention moves from Heracles the

⁴² This is adapted from Courtine (Courtine, 138).

Jäger, to Bacchus the *Akersmann*, and finally to Christ the *Bettler*, the question arises whether any of these identities overlap, or whether each excludes the other.⁴³ Is it possible, for example, that Christ is also a man of the field, or Bacchus a beggar? Turning once more to *Wie wenn am Feiertage* for guidance, we see that the answer is yes. In that text, we read the following description of the gods:

Und die uns lächelnd den Aker gebauet,
In Knechtsgestalt, sie sind erkannt,
Die Allebendigen, die Kräfte der Götter
(Hölderlin, Sattler, and Ross 8: 558).

And those who plowed our fields
In the form of smiling servants
Are now recognized as the all-living
Forces of the gods.

(Hölderlin and Mitchell 18)

(Translation modified)

Here the poet overlays the synonymous figure of the *Landmann* (“farmer”), already juxtaposed with the Dionysian symbol of the grape vine,⁴⁴ with the figure of the “servant” [*Knecht*], a traditional appellation for Christ.⁴⁵ Such syncretic merging of Bacchus and Christ can be found in several of Hölderlin’s hymns, perhaps most notably in *Brot und Wein* (*Bread and Wine*). Intertextual echoes such as these thus inform the grammatical ambiguity of *Bettler*, which like *Jäger* has the same form in both the nominative singular and plural. This ambiguity, combined with the inclusive logic of *oder* (either A or B or both), produces a persistent vagueness and sense of logical inclusion in spite of the apparently distinct appellations. This complicating movement denies neither the distinct typological roles – hunter, man of the field, beggar – of each demigod, nor the “unicity” of Christ. Rather, it prompts the reader to bear in mind the partial interchangeability of these figures: Christ and Bacchus as both *Bettler* and *Akersmann*, and all three as *Jäger*.

Christ’s distinction lies not only in his humility [*Bescheidenheit*], nor just in being “the end” [*das Ende*], but also in his poetological status as *der Sich-Bescheidende*: the one who makes distinction [*Unter-scheidung*] possible. Here, the plurality of meanings contained within the verb *sich bescheiden* is lost in translation. As we have already seen, Christ “concedes,” “humbles,” or “communicates” himself in contrast to the antique demigods Hercules and Bacchus:

Christus aber bescheidet sich selbst.
Wie Fürsten ist Herkules. Gemeingeist Bacchus. Christus aber ist
Das Ende. Wohl ist der noch anderer Natur; erfüllet aber
Was noch an Gegenwart
Den Himmlischen gefehlet an den andern. Diesesmal , oft aber

But Christ concedes himself.
As princes is Hercules. Communal spirit Bacchus. Christ, however, is

⁴³ This is not out of the question given the plural forms *Fürsten*, *Feldherrn* and *Heroën*, which can refer to all three figures. Nevertheless, Eva Kocziszky writes that “[i]n der weiteren Charakterisierung [...] man aber die Pluralform kaum mehr deuten [kann]. Christus ist weder ein Ackersmann, noch ein Jäger. Herakles ist auch kein Ackersmann, ja sicherlich auch kein Bettler” (Kocziszky, 94).

⁴⁴ “Ein Landmann geht [...] / Und von des Himmels erfreuendem Reegen / Der Weinstock trauft[.]” (“[A] farmer / Goes [...] And drops of joyful rain from heaven rest / Upon the vines[.]”) (Hölderlin and Mitchell, 17).

⁴⁵ See, for example, Mark 10:45: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

The end. Indeed he is yet of another nature; fulfills, however,
 What still in the present day
 The heavenly ones lack in each other. This time , but often

Marking “the end” of “the ancient day of the gods,” Christ unites heaven and earth more perfectly because, as Courtine writes, “[m]ore resolutely and unconditionally than the other gods or demigods, he was a man” (Courtine 139).⁴⁶ In this sense, Christ is “the only one” [*der Einzige*] not just for the poet,⁴⁷ but also for the rest of humanity living in the Hesperian age. Yet equally as important are the other senses of *einzig*: “alone” [*allein*], “lonely” [*einsam*], and “set apart” [*abgesondert*]. All of these meanings speak to the messianic dimension of the “in-between” [*das Zwischen*] that characterizes Hesperian writing. As Mackrodt writes, this “intertemporal” and “interspatial” writing takes place in “salvific seclusion,” as though written on an “island” (Mackrodt 195),⁴⁸ or indeed in the desert. What we might then call *ein Wüsteschreiben* (“desert writing”), this is the privileged mode of writing towards which *Der Einzige* “embarks” [*bricht auf*] in a moment of literal “crisis” [*Krise*] (Mackrodt, *Aufbrechende Schrift* 300).⁴⁹ Culminating textually and thematically in the figure of the desert, *Der Einzige* not only figurates, but also stages itself poetologically as a textual desert of “encounter” [*Begegnung*] between the geopoetological realms of Greece and Hesperia, carving out a new geopoetological realm in the process. What is more, this desert gives figure to the enigmatic place described in Hölderlin’s second letter to Böhlendorff, the place where “all the holy places of the earth are together in one place” (Hölderlin and Schmidt 467; Mackrodt, *Aufbrechende Schrift* 226).⁵⁰ Despite the recent argument that this “single place of places” is unrepresentable (McGillen 15–16), this does not hold for *Der Einzige*. Rather than collapse under a “superimposition of places that begins to exceed representation” (McGillen 16), the desert in this poem is able to contain so many “places” precisely because of its inherent ambiguities, built-in tensions, and inclusive logic. As I show in chapter one, these aspects of the desert are present already in the Bible. Given Hölderlin’s Pietist upbringing (Langen 171–172) and religious education, it is hardly conceivable that he would not have been familiar with the ambiguities of the Biblical desert. In any case, whether due to any familiarity or not, Hölderlin’s writings evince a deep “ambivalence” (George 194)⁵¹ towards the desert figure, which “mediates [...] between the negative and positive poles” (George 190).⁵² In *Der Einzige*, such an “intermediate” and

⁴⁶ Here Courtine cites Detlev Lüders, *Die Welt im verringerten Maß*, 49.

⁴⁷ “Ich weiß es aber, eigene Schuld / Ists, denn zu sehr / O Christus! häng ich an dir[.]”

⁴⁸ “[E]in Schreiben in und über Zwischenzeitlichkeit und Zwischenräumlichkeit,” “ein Schreiben in der rettenden Abgesondertheit; ein ‘Inselschreiben.’” We see something of this in manuscript 474: “Auch einige sind, gerettet, als / Auf schönen Inseln. Gelehrt sind die. Versuchungen sind nemlich / Gränzlos an die gegangen. / Zahllose gefallen. Also gieng es, als / Der Erde Vater bereitet ständiges / In Stürmen der Zeit. Ist aber geendet.” (Hölderlin, Sattler, and Ross 8:803)

⁴⁹ “*Der Einzige*. [ist] ein Entwurf der Krise [...], das heißt des Überganges zwischen den geopoetologischen Gegenden Griechenland und Hesperien; des Aufbruchs aus Griechenland nach Hesperien, aus dem Eigenen-Fremden hin zum Fremden-Eigenen. Aus der Präsenz in die Gegenwart – aus der Gegensätzlichkeit von Anwesenheit oder Abwesenheit des Göttlichen ins Messianische als des im Versprechen des Widerkommens eröffneten Zeitraumes des Zwischen.”

⁵⁰ “[A]lle heiligen Orte der Erde zusammen sind um einen Ort.” Letter 241.

⁵¹ George speaks of two “deserts:” the “human desert,” with its negative connotations (e.g. in Hyperion’s *Scheltrede*) and the “other desert,” the “positive locus, the Kantian ‘freie einsame Wüste.’” See George 195–196.

⁵² For negative examples, see Hyperion’s critique of Smyrna as a cultural “wasteland” (“Ich war es endlich müde, mich wegzuwerfen, Trauben zu suchen in der Wüste und Blumen über dem Eisfeld.”). For a more positive valuation

indeterminate figure works not only to represent, but also to produce the “in-between” place of writing, difference and indeterminacy.

The desert’s geopoetological function can be seen perhaps most clearly in the verses that gloss Christ’s temptation in the wilderness. These begin in draft 313, and make clear Christ’s role as a “Figuration der schriftlichen Auslegung, das ‘Syn-‘ der Synthese als differentielles Zugleich”(Mackrodt, *Aufbrechende Schrift* 308):

[...] Nemlich Christus ist ja auch allein
Gestanden unter sichtbarem Himmel und Gestirn, sichtbar
Freiwaltendem über das Eingesetzte, mit Erlaubniß von Gott,
Und die Sünden der Welt, die Unverständlichkeit
Der Kenntnisse nemlich, wenn Beständiges das Geschäftige überwächst
Der Menschen und der Muth des Gestirns war ob ihm. Nemlich immer
jauchzet die Welt

Hinweg von dieser Erde, daß sie die
Entblößet; wo das Menschliche sie nicht hält. Es bleibt aber eine Spur
Doch eines Wortes; die ein Mann erhaschet. (Hölderlin, Sattler, and Ross 8: 795)

These verses are best understood against the backdrop of Hölderlin’s later poetological writings in which the desert is an exemplary figure for *das Aorgische* (“the aorgic”). Hölderlin borrowed this concept from Schiller and used it to refer to the formless, undifferentiated and unconscious qualities of Nature. Elaborated clearly in *Der Grund zum Empedokles* and *Die Anmerkungen zur Antigonä*, the aorgic forms one half of a system that describes art’s relationship to life as one of “harmonious opposition” between the “aorgic” and the “organic” [*das Organische*] (Hölderlin and Schmidt 428).⁵³ In a process of mutual transformations [*Wechselwirkungen*], “the more organic, more artistic person” (“[d]er organischere künstlichere Mensch”) gives shape to the unrepresentable, aorgic nature through his or her own “organic” reflection. In return, he or she achieves “the feeling of perfection” [*das Gefühl der Vollendung*] that can only come through the conscious representation of what before had been only unconsciously felt. This feeling is among the highest human beings can experience, since this newly achieved harmony is a reminder of the “previously reversed pure relationship” [*das vormalige umgekehrte reine Verhältnis*], and the feeling of unity and connection with nature is “more eternal” [*unendlicher*] (Hölderlin and Schmidt 429).⁵⁴

Despite the apparent equivalence of the aorgic and the organic, Hölderlin gives the aorgic a certain primacy as the place in which “everything more organic must be contained” [“alles organischere enthalten sein muß”] (Hölderlin and Schmidt 556, “Über den Unterschied der Dichtarten”). We see this primacy very clearly in *Der Einzige*, where the aorgic tropes of the desert and the abyss frame the organic figure of the cloverleaf, forming the “ground,” so to speak, in which it “blooms.” In the first of these aorgic “places,” the desert, Christ “seizes” the

of the desert see Hölderlin’s letter to Carl Gock, in which he describes Kant as the “Moses unserer Nation, der sie aus der ägyptischen Erschlaffung in die freie einsame Wüste seiner Speculation führt, und der das energische Gesez vom heiligen Berge bringt.” See also the hymnic fragment *Vom Abrund nemlich* (“Denn sinnlicher sind Menschen / In dem Brand / Der Wüste) (Hölderlin, Sattler, and Ross 8:932–933).

⁵³ “Natur und Kunst sind sich im reinen Leben nur harmonisch entgegengesetzt.”

⁵⁴ “[Dieses Gefühl] gehört vielleicht zum höchsten, was der Mensch erfahren kann, denn die jetzige Harmonie mahnt ihn an das vormalige umgekehrte reine Verhältnis, und er fühlt sich und die Natur zweifach, und die Verbindung ist unendlicher.”

“trace of the word” in a moment of “organic” reflection, thereby resisting the aorgic temptation to leave this earth [“von dieser Erde [hinwegzujauchzen]].” The text is clear that Christ achieves this by citing scripture, the “traces” of God’s Word (Mackrodt, “Wüste – Kleeblatt – Abgrund” 198).⁵⁵ Christ’s own words – themselves “traces” of prior words – form yet more links in a chain of inter- and intratextual references.⁵⁶ Tellingly, this chain does not lead back to any originary Word, a “word of bread” [*Brotwort*], as it were, in which signified and signifier coincide without trace or surplus. Rather, they lead back to the biblical scene in which the gulf between signifier and signified first opens: when the Israelites ask, “*Man hu?* [What is it?]”, and with this question give name to the unnamable heavenly food with the interrogative pronoun *man* [“what”] (Frey 104–105).

This question of nameability and (un)intelligibility runs throughout the poem, and here it works to underscore Christ’s poetological role as the one who opens up a new space of Hesperian questioning [*Frageraum*]. We hear it already in the opening lines, which introduce the aorgic figure of the “coasts” [*Küsten*] to which the poet remains “bound” or “chained” [*gefesselt*]: “Was ist es, das / An die alten seeligen Küsten / Mich fesselt [...]?” Comprising a boundary between the sea and the land, the poem’s “coasts” [*Küsten*] give figure to a liminal space of encounter between Greece and Hesperia in a manner not unlike the desert [*Wüste*]. Through the rhyme and near-interchangeability (but for one letter) of the words *Küste* and *Wüste*, the poem highlights the similar function of each “place” as an “in between space” [*ein Zwischen*] in which a typological relationship can be established between Dionysius, Heracles, and Christ. In and through its very textuality, the poem opens up such a “place of encounter” [*Ort der Begegnung*]. As a “demigod of representation” and poetological exemplar, Christ creates this “messianic,” Hesperian space of writing (Mackrodt, *Aufbrechende Schrift* 321). Rather than any “dialectical *Aufhebung*” (George 190) or tidy synthesis of the three demigods, *Der Einzige* instead produces a textual desert beyond the “dichotomous opposition of voice and writing” (Mackrodt, *Aufbrechende Schrift* 321).⁵⁷ The words “captured” [*erhaschet*] in its drafts more resemble spoken words momentarily recorded in the desert sands. These produce an echo that strikes the ear differently depending on how the reader “arranges the sand,” as it were – i.e. how the reader stages, reads, and hears the drafts. In this sense, Hesperian writing is by nature not only *inscribed in*, but *consists of* the desert. It is mode of writing that is shifting, palimpsestic, and deeply improvisatory. In it, certain words such as *aber* and *oder* accumulate like grains of sand,⁵⁸ piling up and forming dunes that bury and dispel any facile notions of stability, unity or synthesis.

⁵⁵ See Mt 4,4: “Jesus answered, ‘It is written: “Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.””

⁵⁶ Christ’s first citation of Deuteronomy 8,3 (“Man shall not live on bread alone[.]”) is itself a quote of Exodus 16, 14–15 (“And the Israelites saw, and they said to each other, “*Man hu*, What is it?” For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the LORD has given you as food.”).

⁵⁷ “Die Aufgabe des Entwurfes, über die sich seine Textualität konstituieren soll, ist, das Zwischen des typologischen Bezuges, als den Ort der Begegnung von Typus und Antitypus zu eröffnen. Die poetologische Vorbildfunktion Christi besteht nicht darin, dass er der Halbgott der *Aufhebung* ins Geistige, des ‘pneumas’, ist, sondern darin, dass er in seinem scheidenden Erscheinen den messianischen Zwischenraum und die messianische Zwischenzeit als hesperische Zeit eröffnet hat und der Halbgott der Repräsentation und Iteration: der Schriftlichkeit ist. Hesperisches Dichten ist ein Dichten in der Schriftlichkeit jenseits der dichotomischen Entgegensetzung von Stimme und Schrift.”

⁵⁸ By my count, the word *aber* appears eighteen times in the two latest drafts of *Der Einzige*. Thirteen of these come leading up to and after the desert’s appearance. In these same verses, *oder* also appears five times, while it appears not at all before the desert is introduced.

Such notions appear to be suggested by the verdant “organic” figure of the cloverleaf [*Kleeblatt*] that “greens beautifully” [*Herrlich grünet*] in the desert, the sandy “ground” of writing that allows for unity in difference.⁵⁹ Besides the overtones of Trinitarian unity (George 194), the *Kleeblatt* contains a poetological resonance in its status as a “leaf,” “page,” or “folio” [*Blatt*]; it is a unified assemblage of three “pages,” and an “image of composed writing” [*Bild der gefaßten Schrift*] that ensures figural containment and stability (Mackrodt, “Wüste – Kleeblatt – Abgrund” 199). Yet the two drafts in which this figure appears – 313 and 337 – also show an “irreducible ambiguity” (Mackrodt, “Wüste – Kleeblatt – Abgrund” 200) towards this and other organic figures of unity. In the movement from draft 313, for example, which represents an “intermediate stage” [*Zwischenstadium*] between drafts 307 and 337, we see a marked change in the poet’s attitude towards the cloverleaf:

313/4

[...] Es bleibet aber eine Spur
Doch eines Wortes; die ein Mann erhaschet. Der Ort war aber

Die Wüste. So sind jene sich gleich. Erfreulich. Herrlich grünet
Ein Kleeblatt. Schade wär’ es, dürfte von solchen
Nicht sagen unser einer, daß es
Heroën sind. Viel ist die Ansicht. Himmlische sind
Und Lebende beieinander, die ganze Zeit. Ein großer Mann,
Im Himmel auch, begehrt zu einem, auf Erden. Immerdar
Gilt diß, daß, alltag, ganz ist die Welt. Oft aber scheint
Ein Großer nicht zusammenzutaugen
Zu Großen. (Hölderlin, Sattler, and Ross 8: 789–790)

337/1–2

- 1 Die Wüste. So sind jene sich gleich. Voll Freuden, reichlich. Herrlich grünet
Ein Kleeblatt. Ungestalt wär, um des Geistes willen, dieses, dürfte von solchen
Nicht sagen, gelehrt im Wissen einer schlechten Gebets, daß sie
Wie Feldherrn mir, Heroën sind. Deß dürfen die Sterblichen wegen dem, weil
Ohne Halt verstandlos Gott ist. Aber wie auf Wagen
Demüthige mit Gewalt
Des Tages oder
Mit Stimmen erscheint Gott als
Natur von außen. Mittelbar
In heiligen Schriften. Himmlische sind
Und Menschen auf Erden beieinander die ganze Zeit. Ein großer Mann,
und ähnlich eine große Seele

⁵⁹ In Mackrodt’s reading, even the letter “W” that runs throughout this verse (“Welt”, “wo”, “Wüste”, “Wort”, “war”) can be seen as literally giving shape to the “angular [*winkelförmig*] journey of the I” and one of the leaves of which the cloverleaf consists (“[Der Buchstabe ‘W’] kann möglicherweise auch als buchstäbliche Gestalt der sich winkelförmig vollziehenden Reise des Ich sowie der Form eines der Blätter, aus denen sich das Kleeblatt zusammensetzt, gesehen werden.”). Mackrodt, *Aufbrechende Schrift* 226.

2 Wenn gleich im Himmel
 Begehrt zu einem auf Erden. Immerdar
 bleibt diß, daß immergekettet alltag ganz ist
 Die Welt. Oft aber scheint
 Ein Großer nicht zusammenzutagen
 Zu Großem. [...] (Hölderlin, Sattler, and Ross 8: 791)

Using a difficult double negative construction, draft 313 states that it would be a “pity” or “shame” [*Schade*] if “one of us” [*unser einer*] would not say [*dürfte nicht sagen*] that the three demigods are “heroes” [*Heroën*]. After expressing confidence in this conventional image, the poet adds to it several more that express the cospatial and cotemporal unity between the “heavenly ones” [*Himmlische*] and “mortals” [*Lebende*], who are said to be next to each other [*beieinander*] “the whole time” [*die ganze Zeit*]. This “eternal” condition [*immerdar gilt diß*], in which “all days the world is whole” [*alltag, ganz ist die Welt*], stems from the desire a “great man” in heaven has for “one on earth” [*Ein großer Mann, / Im Himmel auch, begehrt zu einem auf Erden*]. These verses not only mark a shift away from plural figurations of unity and equivalence [*Heroën, Himmlische, Lebende*] to the specific figuration of Christ as unifier and reconciler of heaven and earth; as we have seen, they also reintroduce the question of Christ’s difference, that is, whether he “belongs” [*zusammenzutagen*] with the other two demigods.

Draft 337 makes this movement towards difference more pronounced by questioning the poet’s attempt to understand God and to mediate God’s word in the poet’s own “holy writings” [*in heiligen Schriften*]. All talk of “pity” or “shame” [*Schade*] has been replaced by poetological reflection and self-critique. Having introduced the *Kleeblatt*, the poet states that this figure [*dieses*] would be without form [*Ungestalt*] if one “taught in the knowledge of a simple/bad prayer” [*gelehrt im Wissen einer schlechten Gebets*] would not say that the demigods are like “generals” and “heroes” [*Wie Feldherrn mir, Heroën sind*]. The dual meaning of *schlecht* as both “simple” and “bad”⁶⁰ casts into question the adequacy of not only the figures of “generals” and “heroes,” but also of the cloverleaf itself, whose very form [*Gestalt*] is contingent on these two suddenly suspect images. In this way, the poet undermines his own attempt to contain Christ, Heracles and Bacchus in his “three-leaved” configuration, an attempt only justifiable because for mortals [*Sterblichen*] such as himself, God is unintelligible without some sort of “hold” [*weil Ohne Halt verstandlos Gott ist.*].

While *Halt* literally means “hold,” “halt” or “pause,” it also denotes the retentive power of memory [*Be-halten*]. It is thus the poet’s task to retain, however temporarily, the otherwise unceasing stream of poetic spirit [*um des Geistes willen*] (Trop 66). For poet and reader alike, such a “hold” is tenuous at best, as it takes place in the desert, a cognitive landscape and “place of writing” [*Schriftort*] in which divergent figurations converge and unite without betraying or surrendering their essential differences. As privileged as the *Kleeblatt* figure may be, it nevertheless “greens” in the desert and is thus subject to the overwhelming “sands” of indeterminacy. These gather about it and, like a sandstorm or blizzard, are prone to create what Sabine Frost calls “white out” effects that “complicate the process of reading and understanding”

⁶⁰ By the early 19th century, the semantic shift from “simple” to “bad” had already occurred (Grimm et al., “schlecht”).

(Frost 89–90).⁶¹ This is one way to think about the large white gap⁶² that appears in same line that introduces the notion of poetic remembrance:

[...] Ohne Halt verstandlos Gott ist. Aber wie auf Wagen
Demüthige mit Gewalt
Des Tages oder
Mit Stimmen erscheint Gott als
Natur von außen. Mittelbar
In heiligen Schriften.

[...] Without hold God is unintelligible. But as upon chariots
Humble ones with violence
Of the day or
With voices God appears as
Nature from the outside. Mediated
In holy writings (Hölderlin, Sattler, and Ross 8: 791).⁶³

This blank space “defigures” (and “disfigures”) the text, prompting several questions. The first concerns the relationship between the “humble ones” [*Demüthige*] and the concept of poetic retention. Does this nominalized adjective refer to “humble” poets like the speaker who “dare”⁶⁴ to put into “holy writings” the way God “appears” [*erscheinet*] “with the violence of the day” [*mit Gewalt / Des Tages*], “with voices” [*Mit Stimmen*] or as “nature from the outside” [*als Natur von außen*]? Or does *mit Gewalt* also refer to the “violence” of the poetic act itself, which represents an act of hubris everything but “humble”? Once again, an inclusive logic of both/and is at work, and it is impossible to privilege one reading over another without violating the text. Such indeterminacy and ambivalence is even contained within the core image of the *Kleeblatt*, whose first four letters, *K-l-e-e*, can be rearranged to spell the word *E-k-e-l*: “disgust”. This anagram suggests the poet’s simultaneous pleasure and “disgust” not only with this and other figures of unity [*Voll Freuden, reichlich. Herrlich grünet / Ein Kleeblatt*], but also with his entire comparative project [*schön und lieblich ist es zu vergleichen*].

Indeed, the simultaneity of pleasure and disgust is one of the defining characteristics of Hölderlin’s desert writing, a literary mode that is part and parcel of what Mackrodt calls Hölderlin’s “poetology of *Scheitern*.” Mackrodt coins this untranslatable term from the third draft of *Mnemosyne*, which famously begins:

Reif sind, in Feuer getaucht, gekochet
Die Frücht und auf der Erde geprüft und ein Gesez ist
Daß alles hineingeht, Schlangen gleich,
Prophetisch, träumend auf
Den Hügeln des Himmels. Und vieles

⁶¹ “To counter immediate perception, literature utilizes techniques that complicate the process of reading and understanding. These are rhetorical methods like defiguration, the suspension of meaning, or shifting to a meta-level on which the text breaks out of its story-telling to talk about itself. I call those break-outs of semantics literary ‘whiteout’ effects.”

⁶² As Trop notes, these gaps run throughout the *Homburger Folioheft* (Trop 74).

⁶³ 337/1, Homburg J 15.

⁶⁴ The verb *wagen* (“to dare”) is a homonym of *Wagen* (“chariots”).

Wie auf den Schultern eine
 Last von Scheitern ist
 Zu behalten. Aber böß sind
 Die Pfade. Nemlich unrecht,
 Wie Rosse, gehn die gefangenen
 Element' und alten
 Geseze der Erd. Und immer
 Ins Ungebundene gehet eine Sehnsucht. Vieles aber ist
 Zu behalten. Und Noth die Treue.
 Vorwärts wagent **aber oder** rückwärts wollen wir
 Nicht sehn. Uns wiegen lassen, wie
 Auf schwankem Kahne der See.

[...]

Wie aber Liebes? [...]. (Hölderlin, Sattler, and Ross 8: 962–963)

Like *Der Einzige*, *Mnemosyne* lends itself readily to a poetological reading. The fire [*Feuer*] of the first verse, for example, can be understood as the aorgic heavenly fire, which the poet attempts to grasp and transmit. Contained within this blaze is, of course, the aorgic desert, the place where the heavenly fire burns most hotly (Kocziszky 96). In this poetological reading, the “ripe fruits” would refer to the poet’s own (organic) song that he has “cooked” in the (aorgic) fire. The poet performs this “culinary” feat in accordance with the poetological “law” [*Gesetz*] that into his song “everything goes in, like snakes, / Prophetic, dreaming on / The hills of the sky” [*Daß alles hineingeht, Schlangen gleich, / Prophetisch, träumend auf / Den Hügeln des Himmels*]. While these lines are rather hermetic, they are also very concrete: the snakes evoke the circular indeterminacy of head and tail merging, and ravenous (self-)consumption. The tension of this indeterminate, all-consuming, and self-consuming poetics becomes clearer in the following lines, which stress the role of memory in bearing the “burden of *Scheitern*” [*Last von Scheitern*]. While the noun *Scheiter* literally denotes pieces of wood that have been cut, especially for the purpose of building a fire, the verb *scheitern* also means “to break apart” and, by extension, “to fail.” A sense of breakdown and failure is evident in the text. For example, the poet walks the “evil” paths [*Aber böß sind / Die Pfade*] of his own unstable yet compulsive textual production, whose “captured elements and old laws of the earth” threaten to run – one is tempted to say “gallop” – away from him “wrongly, like horses” [*Nemlich unrecht, / Wie Rosse, gehn die gefangenen / Element' und alten / Geseze der Erd*]. Accordingly, the poet’s task is to bear his “burden” and to curb his longing to cast his bundle of “wood” [*Scheitern*] upon the aorgic fire in an act of dual immolation: of his song and himself [*Und immer / Ins Ungebundene gehet eine Sehnsucht*]. The poet’s aorgic urge “to go into the unbounded” is kept in check only by his need to faithfully halt and retain the flow of poetry [*Vieles aber / ist / Zu behalten. Und Noth die Treue*]. Interestingly, this moment of poetic retention is described in terms both aspatial and atemporal [*Vorwärts wagent aber oder rückwärts wollen wir / Nicht sehen*]. The poet deploys the familiar *aber oder* formulation to suggest simultaneous inclusion and exclusion, this time of organic [*Kahne*; “boat”] and aorgic [*See*; “sea”] imagery. Instead of adding his *Scheitern* to the fire, as it were, the poet builds with them a vessel of words. With this “boat” [*Kahne*], he attempts to rock himself and the reader into a more receptive and retentive state atop

a sea [*See*] of undifferentiated oblivion [*Uns wiegen lassen, wie / Auf schwankem Kahne der See*]. While reading these lines, we should bear in mind the close rhetorical proximity between the sea and the desert (McGinn, “Ocean and Desert”). Both of these aorgic topoi are “boundless” and indeterminate, and both form the (unstable) “ground” on which Hölderlin’s *Andenken* attempts to retain the differentiated and undecidable “burden of *Scheitern*,” to keep these shards from falling apart and “going to ruin” (*abire in ruinas*) (Mackrodt, *Aufbrechende Schrift* 337). In *Mnemosyne*, the poet attempts to do this by building a “boat,” in *Der Einzige*, it is by planting a “cloverleaf.” Whichever organic figure he chooses, however, the poet must allow it to be dashed on the rocks, or buried in the sands of indeterminacy. In *Mnemosyne*, this movement towards “shipwreck” is marked by the line *Wie aber liebes?*. This enigmatic verse begins the penultimate of the two concluding strophes in which the poet intimates the death of Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory and mother of the nine muses. It is in keeping with his desert writing that Hölderlin, after staging such a demanding experiment in cognitive retention, should suggest the possibility that such retention is not, or no longer possible. And yet, as his texts themselves attest, this rash conclusion is facile and false. The truth lies somewhere between the poles of possibility and impossibility, in the coexistence and unity of opposites, in the state of *aber oder*.

III: *Hyperion*’s Ashes, Or: The Desert of Disfiguration

While a similar idea – Heraclitus’ unity of opposites – plays a central role in the novel *Hyperion*, it may not be immediately clear how this text represents a precursor to Hölderlin’s later desert writing. If we simply begin by looking at the moments where desert rhetoric appears in this text, we see that it very often expresses a negative critique. Perhaps most famously, the desert appears towards the end of the novel in *Hyperion*’s invective [*Scheltrede*] against the Germans:

Wüster immer, öder werden da die Menschen, die doch alle schöngeboren sind; der Knechtsinn wächst, mit ihm der grobe Mut, der Rausch wächst mit den Sorgen, und mit der Üppigkeit der Hunger und die Nahrungsangst; zum Fluche wird der Segen jedes Jahrs und alle Götter fliehn. (Hölderlin, Sattler, and Ross 11: 778)

There the men become ever more barren, more desolate, though they were all born beautiful; servility grows, with it impudence, intoxication grows with worries, and with plenty grow hunger and fear of famine; the blessing of every year becomes a curse, and all gods flee. (Hölderlin, *Hyperion, Or, The Hermit in Greece* 211)

Silvio Vietta has noted that in this passage, *Hyperion* uses desert imagery to malign the Germans for their “elemental loss of nature” [*elementaren Naturverlustes*] and “foreclosure of the historical possibility of a society reconciled in beauty and freedom” [“Verfehlung der geschichtlichen Möglichkeit einer in Schönheit und Freiheit versöhnten Gesellschaft”] (Vietta 185). Less remarked upon but equally damning is *Hyperion*’s critique of Smyrna as a sort of cultural “wasteland”: “Ich war es endlich müde, mich wegzuwerfen, Trauben zu suchen in der Wüste und Blumen über dem Eisfeld” [“Finally I was tired of squandering myself, searching for grapes in the desert and flowers upon the ice field”] (Hölderlin, *Hyperion, Or, The Hermit in*

Greece 31; Hölderlin, Sattler, and Ross 11:603).⁶⁵ Hyperion uses the figure of the desert to describe an external cultural condition, but also to express a corresponding spiritual void within himself and his contemporaries: “Über dir und vor dir ist es freilich leer und öde, weil es in dir leer und öd ist“ [“It is undoubtedly empty and desolate above you and before you because it is empty and desolate within you”] (Hölderlin, *Hyperion, Or, The Hermit in Greece* 62; Hölderlin, Sattler, and Ross 11: 632). Indeed, the novel abounds with so many examples of rhetorical dryness, aridity and desiccation, that the phrase “von der Mutterbrust gerissen und in die Wüste geworfen” [“torn from [...] mother’s breast and cast into the desert”] (Hölderlin, *Hyperion, Or, The Hermit in Greece* 79; Hölderlin, Sattler, and Ross 11: 653) can be said to sum up Hyperion’s view of the modern human condition.

But despite these examples to the contrary, it is false that the desert lacks any positive valuation in *Hyperion*. The novel bears within it the familiar conception of the desert “as a place to settle and to have a career as a desert father, or a hermit” (George 193).⁶⁶ We see this not only in the second part of the title, *Der Eremit in Griechenland (The Hermit in Greece)*, but also in many passages that echo biblical and monastic conceptions of the desert as a paradisiacal locus of contemplation, reflection, memory and salvation. While Hölderlin adapts these Christian models for his Spinozan conception of a divine nature that is wholly immanent, they nevertheless constitute a deeper textual layer that complicates any reading of the desert in the novel.

This implicit layer is complemented by the text’s explicit structure as an epistolary novel consisting almost entirely of Hyperion’s letters to his German friend Bellarmin. This shadowy correspondent serves the indispensable function “as the absent but implied other without whom the existence of the letters could not be imagined.” Indeed, “Bellarmin [...] is not just the passive recipient of a life’s confession, the uninvolved witness to the memory of his friend; rather, he endows Hyperion with the capacity to write and to form a memory where no memory existed before” (Pankow 157). Writing his memories in and from his “desert” solitude high atop the Isthmus of Corinth, Hyperion thanks Bellarmin for asking him to “[recall] times past to his memory” [“Ich danke dir, daß du mich bittest, dir von mir zu erzählen, daß du die vorigen Zeiten mir in’s Gedächtniß bringst”] (Hölderlin, *Hyperion, Or, The Hermit in Greece* 14; Hölderlin, Sattler, and Ross 11: 586). In doing this, Hyperion acknowledges that the ability to narrate his own life originates from outside of himself – from “the other” – through what Edgar Pankow calls the “dynamic” of epistolary exchange (Pankow 157).⁶⁷ As we read Hyperion’s words of thanks in this the novel’s third letter, it is clear that the interrelated acts of remembering and writing soothe Hyperion’s mind and spirit. But these words also testify to the desert’s central role as the site of poetic production in which the self stages an encounter with the other. This encounter amounts to a “mutual exploration of otherness,” and it establishes “a direct contact – be it with Greek antiquity or an epistolary correspondent –” without any respective loss of self. In other words, the desert of (epistolary) writing is the place [*Ort*] where the self moves “toward the other as other” (Pankow 144–145). In this “in-between” space, a unity is achieved between the self and the other without any synthesis or loss of difference.

⁶⁵ Remarkably, Hyperion combines both desert and polar imagery [*Eisfeld*] to convey his critique of the Smyrnans’ contemporary culture. This recalls that the defining characteristic of a desert is not temperature but lack of rainfall.

⁶⁶ The “desert” here is to be understood metaphorically as any place of solitude, reflection and recollection: the “wilderness” into which Hyperion has withdrawn from the world.

⁶⁷ As Pankow notes, something similar is at stake in Hölderlin’s second Böhlendorff letter, where Hölderlin writes: “Schreibe doch nur mir bald. Ich brauche Deine reinen Töne. Die Psyche unter Freunden, das Entstehen des Gedankens im Gespräch und Brief ist Künstlern nöthig. Sonst haben wir keinen für uns selbst; sondern er gehöret dem heiligen Bilde, das wir bilden. Lebe recht wohl. Dein H” (Hölderlin and Schmidt 467).

In this regard, the desert in *Hyperion* bears hallmarks of the desert in *Der Einzige* despite several obvious differences. For example, Hyperion's desert evokes the cultural wasteland of modernity in which he feels so out of place, and the personal "devastation" he experiences after the Greek military defeat, Alabanda's departure, and Diotima's death. But these deserts are only the negative expression of a more positive, productive solitude. In this desert of writing and language, Hyperion engages in acts of contemplation, reflection, and recollection in order to establish an ontological unity with the Other, be it the "All of nature" [*All der Natur*] (Hölderlin, *Hyperion, Or, The Hermit in Greece* 12; Hölderlin, Sattler, and Ross 11: 585),⁶⁸ Diotima,⁶⁹ or Bellarmin (Pankow 157–160). This desert is a place of momentary reconciliation in the midst of strife, where "all that is separated comes together again" (Hölderlin, *Hyperion, Or, The Hermit in Greece* 215; Hölderlin, Sattler, and Ross 11: 782).

Yet as much as the desert in *Hyperion* offers reconciliation, it also consists of the same unstable stuff as the desert in *Der Einzige*: words. We see an awareness of this in Hyperion's last letter in volume one. Generally taken to represent the philosophical credo of the novel, Hyperion's discourse on ancient Greece is followed by a description of the ruin that is his contemporary Athens:

Wie ein unermeßlicher Schiffbruch, wenn die Orkane verstummt sind und die Schiffer entflohn, und der Leichnam der zerschmetterten Flotte unkenntlich auf der Sandbank liegt, so lag vor uns Athen, und die verwaisten Säulen standen vor uns, wie die nackten Stämme eines Walds, der am Abend noch grünte, und des Nachts darauf in Feuer aufging. (Hölderlin, Sattler, and Ross 11: 685)

Like an immense shipwreck when the hurricanes have fallen silent and the sailors have fled and the corpse of the shattered fleet lies unrecognizable on the sandbank, thus lay Athens before us, and abandoned pillars stood before us like the naked trunks of a forest that had still been green in the evening and in the night had gone up in flames. (Hölderlin, *Hyperion, Or, The Hermit in Greece* 114)

This description is notable for its echoes of Hölderlin's later desert writing and poeology of *Scheitern*. Most prominently, Hyperion describes the present day historical remnant of ancient Greece as "an immeasurable shipwreck" [*ein unermeßlicher Schiffbruch*]. This nautical metaphor calls to mind the *Scheitern* and *Kahne* of *Mnemosyne*, which Hölderlin would compose six years later. It also gestures toward the limits of thought, language, and representation through

⁶⁸ "Eines zu seyn mit Allem, was lebt, in seeliger Selbstvergessenheit wiederzukehren in's All der Natur, das ist der Gipfel der Gedanken und Freuden, das ist die heilige Bergeshöhe, der Ort der ewigen Ruhe, wo der Mittag seine Schwüle und der Donner seine Stimme verliert und das kochende Meer der Wooge des Kornfelds gleicht."

⁶⁹ In Diotima's company, Hyperion forgets not only language ("meine Diotima hatte mich so einsilbig gemacht") (Hölderlin, *Hyperion, Or, The Hermit in Greece* 68;84; Hölderlin, Sattler, and Ross 11: 641;657), but also his being [*Dasein*]: [Diotima] war mein Lethe, diese Seele, mein heiliger Lethe, woraus ich die Vergessenheit des Daseins trank, daß ich vor ihr stand, wie ein Unsterblicher, und freudig mich schalt, und wie nach schweren Träumen lächeln mußte über alle Ketten, die mich gedrückt" (Hölderlin, *Hyperion, Or, The Hermit in Greece* 79; Hölderlin, Sattler, and Ross 11: 652). Diotima's island home of Kalaurea thus represents the salvific side of the desert figure. For if the condition of being "cast into the desert" symbolizes a state of spiritual aridity and conscious division [*Bewußtsein*] from Being [*Sein*], the desert is simultaneously the locus of momentary self-oblivion and unity with Being as embodied by Diotima. She is Hyperion's "watchword" ("Losungswort"), a figure who occupies the golden mean between humanity and the divine (Hölderlin, *Hyperion, Or, The Hermit in Greece* 91; Hölderlin, Sattler, and Ross 11: 664).

the adjective *unermesslich*. This word suggests the impossibility of reconstructing the fragments of the past, of “resurrecting” the “corpse of the shattered fleet” [*der Leichnam der zerschmetterten Flotte*], and mobilizing it for the present day. Rather appropriately, this “corpse” lies “unrecognizably on the sand” [*unkennlich auf der Sandbank*], a site of ruin and fragmentation that calls to mind the place for which it is a metonym: the desert. Rendering the “corpse” “unrecognizable” [*unkennlich*], this implied desert is a figure of disfigurement. This means that it frustrates all attempts to “know” [*kennen*] or “recognize” [*er-kennen*] the form these *Scheitern* once took, and the shape they take now. It is as if the heavenly fire, [*d]as gewaltige Element* (Hölderlin and Schmidt 466), has burned too hotly, leaving only the city’s “orphan columns” [*die verwaisten Säulen*] to stand “like the naked trunks of a forest that had still been green in the evening and in the night had gone up in flames.” While the text suggests a temporal proximity between the “evening” of ancient Greece and the “night” of Hyperion’s present moment, the abyss of time between the two moments cannot be bridged. The text calls into question the possibility of metaphorical return to Greek antiquity, with “[t]he journey that was supposed to transport and carry over (*μεταφέρειν*) [coming] up against the ruined metaphor of its own *raison d’être*.” Still, for Hyperion, the shipwreck of Greek antiquity is not an illusion. On the contrary, “the dead flame of Greek spirit leaves behind the memento of an ashen trace” (Pankow 156–157). Instead of a metaphor of return, Hyperion proposes a metonym of “ashes.” As both metonymy and metaphor, ash not only suggests dissolution but also denotes material residue from which something new can be created. Athens may be little more than charred trunks of a once verdant “forest,” but these smouldering trees have left “the memento of an ashen trace” that fuels Hyperion’s hopes and moves him to write. More importantly, these ashes comprise Hyperion’s language. As a cyclical poetics of simultaneous (re)constitution and dissolution, his desert writing involves both the recovery and the production of ashes.

The inherent tension of such a “poetics of ashes” becomes clear in the novel’s final letter, in which Hyperion writes Bellarmin of his final spring spent in Germany. He describes one particular moment of “unfathomable longing” [*unbegreiflich Sehnen*] in which he called out to his beloved Diotima and believed to hear her voice:

Diotima, rief ich, wo bist du, o wo bist du? Und mir war, als hört ich Diotimas Stimme,
die Stimme, die mich einst erheitert in den Tagen der Freude –

Bei den Meinen, rief sie, bin ich, bei den Deinen, die der irre Menschengestalt
mißkennt!

Ein sanfter Schrecken ergriff mich und mein Denken entschlummerte in mir.

O liebes Wort aus heiligem Munde, rief ich, da ich wieder erwacht war, liebes
Rätsel, faß ich dich?

Und Einmal sah ich noch in die kalte Nacht der Menschen zurück und schauert
und weinte vor Freuden, daß ich so selig war und Worte sprach ich, wie mir dünkt, aber
sie waren, wie des Feuers Rauschen, wenn es auffliegt und die Asche hinter sich läßt –

“O du, so dacht ich, mit deinen Göttern, Natur! ich hab ihn ausgeträumt, von
Menschendingen den Traum und sage, nur du lebst, und was die Friedenslosen
erzwungen, erdacht, es schmilzt, wie Perlen von Wachs, hinweg von deinen Flammen!
(Hölderlin, Sattler, and Ross 11: 780–781)

Diotima, I cried, where are you, O where are you? And I felt as if I heard Diotima’s
voice, the voice that once cheered me in the days of joy –

I am with mine, she cried, with yours, with those that the errant human spirit does not recognize!

A gentle terror seized me and my thought fell asleep in me.

O dear word from holy mouth, I cried, when I had again awakened, dear riddle, do I grasp you?

And one more time I looked back into the cold night of men and shuddered and wept with joy that I was so blessed, and I spoke words, I think, but they were like the roar of fire when it flies up and leaves the ashes behind –

“O you,” so I thought, “with your gods, nature! I have dreamed it out, the dream of human things, and say: only you live, and what those without peace have compelled and conceived melts away from your flames like beads of wax! (Hölderlin, *Hyperion, Or, The Hermit in Greece* 213–214)

This dense passage is fascinating on many scores, not least for the way it blurs the line between waking life and dream, between solitary meditation and auditory hallucination. Perhaps most impressive is the manner in which Hyperion frames his final words, the only ones in the entire novel to appear in quotation marks. These he describes as “words, I think, but they were like the roar of the fire when it flies up and leaves the ashes behind.” The phrase “I spoke words, I think” “testifies to a fundamental insecurity about what one calls words and about the calling of words” (Pankow 170). Hyperion’s analogy of words to fire and ash is apt in expressing the (self-) awareness of all desert writing: the awareness of language’s limits and its referential ability. The phrase *wie mir dünkt* [literally: “as it seems to me”] testifies to the essential “seemingness” [*das Dünkende*] of words, whose elusive essence exists only on the level of the metaphorical. Hyperion’s words suggest that language’s essence might best be found in its non-linguistic acoustic properties: in the “roar of the fire” [*des Feuers Rauschen*]. While this “roar” rises up, perhaps to its heavenly origin, what remains down here on earth are its ashen traces. It remains the poet’s task to collect and to work with these ashes, which themselves “do not signify the simple absence of insight, but are situated at the very origin of Hyperion’s epistolary project itself” (Pankow 171).

Here I take this reading a step further and suggest that these ashes lie at the very heart of Hölderlin’s desert writing. Like dust and sand, ash is a substance in a state of dissolution, perpetually on the borderline between being and non-being. Evoking what Eric Santner calls a “thinglike nothingness” (Santner 100–102),⁷⁰ ash is a substance that for Robert Walser is particularly “humble,” “permeated” as it is “by the belief that it is good for nothing” (Walser and Greven 321).⁷¹ Robert Walser’s view of ash, expressed in his microgram *Asche, Nadel, Bleistift und Zündhölzchen* from 1915, echoes Hölderlin’s analogy of words to ashes and the sense of “disgust” [*Ekel*] contained within his image of the *Kleeblatt*. Like all desert writing, however, that of Hölderlin – and of Walser, too – is characterized by an attempt, or a compulsion, to work with what is at hand, be it ash, dust, or sand. In both *Der Einzige* and *Hyperion*, Hölderlin arranges the ash and sand of words not in the form of a finished work, but in a series of “interminable meditations” (Pankow 170), or in what Cori Mackrodt calls “a writing” [*ein*

⁷⁰ See also W.G. Sebald’s comments on ash (p.102).

⁷¹ “Asche ist die Demut, die Belanglosigkeit und die Wertlosigkeit selber, und was das Schönste ist: sie ist selbst durchdrungen von dem Glauben, daß sie zu nichts taugt.”

Schreiben].⁷² One need look no farther than the novel's final lines, which hold out the promise of more letters and, thus, "[m]ore fires, more ashes" (Pankow 172): *So dacht ich. Nächstens mehr* ["So I thought. More soon."]. The oft remarked circularity of the novel testifies to the unstable stability and provisional nature of desert writing, which leaves itself open to renewed stagings and encounters, renewed successes and failures.

I would like to return now to the question I posed at the start of the chapter: how might Hölderlin's desert writing have changed from *Hyperion* to *Der Einzige*, if at all? Despite the difficulties comparing Hölderlin's signature work of prose fiction to one of his most difficult hymns, I claim that *Der Einzige* presents a more radical figuration of the desert. Perhaps unsurprisingly, I also argue that *Hyperion* evinces more hope in the power of poetic language to reconcile the human and the divine, and to produce by poetic artifice an ontological unity within the reader's mind. If vestiges of this belief still appear in *Der Einzige*, the textual signs of "breakdown" are more prominent. They occupy more space – or perhaps do not occupy any space at all, but are suggested by the blank white spaces that interrupt several verses in the *Homburger Folioheft*. Despite these indications, vestiges of hope cannot be denied. The hymn's strenuous cognitive demands, for example, point to a fragile, resilient belief that it can produce a "desert" in the reader's mind and memory.

Yet at the same time, the "disgust" of working with "sand" is all too evident in *Der Einzige*. This is a sentiment that *Hyperion*'s "ashes" hint at, but are unable or unwilling to articulate. As a reader, I am reminded of the question posed by Celan's poem *Keine Sandkunst mehr* (1982), a question that addresses the risks and difficulties of working with the "sand" of words: "Your question – your answer. / Your song, what does it know? ["Deine Frage – deine Antwort. / Dein Gesang, was weiß er?"]. In *Der Einzige*, Hölderlin also questions how much his song "knows." Rather than offer a clear answer, he opens a space of questioning. Hölderlin's frequent use and careful placement of *aber* and *oder* produce undecidability and differential unity by creating a verbal "sand dune" that undermines and destabilizes the cloverleaf and other figures of unity. Complementing Hölderlin's ambiguous attitude towards his privileged tropes is the desert in which he inscribes them and of which they consist. Located beyond all dichotomies, this ambiguous desert represents both the unstable material of language and a liminal, speculative place [*Ort; topos*]. It is there that Hölderlin seizes "traces" of both the word and Word, mediating, Christ-like, between earth and heaven. And it is there where traces of Hölderlin's early poetology can be found, along with his attempt to enact in language the inseparability of originary unity and reflective consciousness. Thus, at stake in *Der Einzige*, with its numerous *abers* and *oders*, is the textual production of a state similar to "the paradoxical state of the 'oder auch,'" which the contemporaneous hymn *Der Rhein* provokes in the reader's mind. This state of simultaneous exclusion and inclusion mimicks the "turning of the double-sided page" of the text *Urtheil/Seyn*, and demands the activation of the reader's memory, the cognitive state of the in-between (Trop 66). *Der Einzige* stages a similar experiment in cognitive retention. The state it provokes is not that of *oder auch*, but of the *aber oder* ["but or"]. Individually, these words begin to pile up like grains of sand the closer the poet gets to the end of his latest draft. And as we have seen, this precise combination even appears in the hymn *Mnemosyne* ["Vorwärts wägend aber oder rückwärts wollen wir / Nicht sehn."]. This indeterminate state of the "but or" is thus meant to be "held" by the reader in the "desert" of her memory. In this respect, it is fair to

⁷² "Fortschreiben und Weiterschreiben ist kein Prozeß hin zu zunehmender Geschlossenheit und Vollendung, keine Entfaltung zum *Werk*, sondern fortgehende Entstellung, Ruinierung – desaströs."

say that for Hölderlin the desert is not only a poetological figure, but also a privileged cognitive landscape.

While the precise nature of this *aber-oder* state is obscure, Mackrodt's suggestion of a late poetology of *Scheitern* offers a compelling way of understanding this state of simultaneous qualification (*aber*) and inclusion (*oder*). *Der Einzige* suggests that this oscillating state between Greece and Hesperia, between evening and night, between fire and ash is the poet's desert "home." It is the space in which differences need not be erased but can stand "side by side" as at the edge of an abyss. Situated always on the cusp of darkness, Hölderlin's desert writing might be called a "twilight writing." It is a writing done *by*, and *with* the ashes of a dying fire.

Chapter 3

Historical Rupture and the Devastation of Memory in Stifter's *Der Hagestolz*

In recent years, the works of Adalbert Stifter have been celebrated for their fascinating and often unsettling meditations on humanity's relationship with itself and the natural world. While his works may appear at times to present nature as cruelly indifferent to human concerns, Stifter's nature transcends questions of care and indifference and marks a realm of radical otherness (Ragg-Kirkby 207) that is "unfathomable" [*unergründlich*] (Weber 355; Ragg-Kirkby 219). Stifter's interest in the limits of human cognition, history and memory is matched perhaps only by his keen interest in geology, geological processes, and what over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries would come to be called "deep time" (Attanucci, "Stories from Earth" 117). That Stifter reflected on the place of his own poetic and artistic output within this vast, seemingly "empty" (Stifter and Ferro 18; Ragg-Kirkby 217) cosmos hardly bears mention, since this is obvious to any careful reader of his works. But that Stifter did so by using the desert figure has only begun to be elaborated by Helena Ragg-Kirkby and others.

As Ragg-Kirkby notes, an astonishing number of Stifter's texts deal with deserts of one kind or another. This should come as no surprise given Stifter's keen interest in geology, travel literature (Attanucci, "Stories from Earth" 9–12), and the prevailing Orientalism of the nineteenth century. Nor should it surprise us that given the close textual and rhetorical link between the desert and writing, at least one of Stifter's deserts would be poetologically legible as the white page in which the author leaves traces of writing in an intensive process of revision and transcription ("poetologisch lesbar als das weiße Blatt, auf das der Schreibende seine Schriftspuren in einem arbeitsintensiven Prozess des Um- und Überschreibens setzt.") (Gerlach 116). With this observation, Franziska Frei Gerlach refers to the desert in *Abdias* (1842), an early novella about a Jewish merchant who lives with his family in the Sahara desert. But a similar geopoetological understanding informs another text in which the desert does not appear explicitly, but in the guise, as it were, of dust and sand. I speak here of the novella *Der Hagestolz* (*The Bachelors*) (1850), one of Stifter's most evocative reflections on poetics, history and memory. Before I examine the way in which Stifter deploys poetological and memorial figurations of the desert in this text, I would like to say a few words about the two main interlocutors with whom I place Stifter in conversation. These are Walter Benjamin and Martin Heidegger. Their work both informs, and offers a point of departure for my reading of Stifter's text.

In their respective criticism of Stifter, Benjamin and Heidegger both address what they consider his relationship to language and, in particular, the silence [*das Schweigen*] they hear in his texts. For Benjamin, this silence is so pervasive that he calls the basic characteristic of Stifter's writings a "peacefulness" [*Ruhe*], or "absence of any acoustic sensation." This absence of sound is the result of Stifter's inability to perceive "any revelation which can only be *heard* – that is, which belongs to the metaphysically acoustic realm." Stifter's faulty ear makes his characters' dialogue "ostensive," expository, and lacking in deeper emotion or "shock." Perhaps most damningly, Benjamin calls Stifter "spiritually mute" [*seelisch stumm*], that is to say lacking "contact with the essence of the world, with language, from which speech arises." Because of this, Stifter is incapable of discovering "the liberating utterance that lies near at hand and would assure his salvation" (Benjamin, Eiland, and Smith 1: 112; Benjamin and Schweppenhäuser 2.2: 112).

For his part, Heidegger arrives at the opposite reading (Geulen 55). Applying his notion of “the unspoken” [*das Ungesprochene*] to Stifter’s “Ice Story” (“Eisgeschichte”) from *My Great-grandfather’s Notebook (Die Mappe meines Urgroßvaters)* (1841/2; 1847), Heidegger proclaims that

[d]as Zeigen des wahrhaft Großen im Kleinen, das Zeigen in das Unsichtbare, und zwar durch das Augenfällige und durch das Tägliche der Menschenwelt hindurch, das Hörenlassen des Ungesprochenen im Gesprochenen – dieses Sagen ist das Wirkende im Wort des Dichters Adalbert Stifter. (Heidegger, *Aus der Erfahrung des Denkens*, 1910-1976 197)

the showing of the truly great in the small, the pointing into the invisible, and through the obvious and the everyday of the human realm, the allowing-to-be-heard of the unspoken in the spoken – this saying is the working in the word of the poet Adalbert Stifter.

For Heidegger, Stifter’s poetic language “works” by freeing itself from the necessity to signify, and by gesturing instead into the mute, invisible realm beyond signification. What Benjamin critiques as ostentation, Heidegger praises as a self-reflexive pointing [*Zeigen*] to the symbolic character of language. This gesture allows “the spoken” [*das Gesprochene*] to make audible the “unspoken” out of which all poetry speaks (Geulen 53–54). Thus, for Heidegger, Stifter does not lack “contact with the essence of the world,” as Benjamin would have it; rather, Stifter’s prose betrays a mute awareness that “the essential being of language is Saying as Showing” (Heidegger, *On the Way to Language* 123; Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache* 237).

In this chapter, I move beyond the question of silence of speech as a basis for staging a conversation between Stifter, Benjamin and Heidegger. I do this in the belief that Benjamin and Heidegger have much more to say about Stifter than their explicit criticism on him reveals. This is especially true of their thoughts on history, memory and oblivion, subjects that were of great concern to Stifter. To show how other works by Benjamin and Heidegger can shed further light on Stifter’s oeuvre, I create a constellation consisting of the following texts: *Der Hagestolz*; Benjamin’s theses “On the Concept of History” (“Über den Begriff der Geschichte”) (1940); and the lectures that comprise Heidegger’s *What is Called Thinking? (Was heißt Denken?)* (1951-52). By examining the way these texts speak to one another, I show that Benjamin and Heidegger can be brought into a certain harmony when it comes to Stifter, and can even produce a fresh reading of one of his most compelling stories.

One of the most important ways *Der Hagestolz* addresses history, memory and oblivion is through its figurations of the desert. This seems to have escaped critical attention despite the work of Ragg-Kirkby and others who have explored Stifter’s use of the desert to great rhetorical and speculative effect (Ragg-Kirkby 207). This might have something to do with the fact that in *Der Hagestolz*, the desert appears disguised in the metonyms of dust and sand: the dust that covers the characters and their material possessions; and the sand on which the old unmarried uncle – the titular “Hagestolz” – sits, and into which he ultimately sinks. As I will argue, these metonyms point to an erasure from human and generational memory, and efforts to keep the dust and sand at bay represent attempts, at once futile and fruitful, to preserve the human experience that material objects have the power to contain and transmit.

Nowhere is this more visible than in the old bachelor uncle and the dusty objects he

collects. This somewhat “pathetic” (Attanucci, “Der Junggeselle zwischen Familie und Amt” 151) old man is one of two textual and generational “counterparts” (“Gegenbilder”) at the heart of the text. The other is his nephew Victor, a disconsolate orphan who lacks money and therefore the means to marry and have a family. After taking leave of his foster mother and her idyllic home to start a life of civil service (Attanucci, “Der Junggeselle zwischen Familie und Amt” 150),⁷³ Victor must first make a three-day journey to visit his uncle, his last living blood relation, who lives a hermit’s life on a remote island in the middle of an alpine lake. There, after spending nearly a week unsure of the purpose of his visit, Victor learns that his uncle has no clear plans to let him leave. Having effectively become a prisoner on his uncle’s ironic, utopian island (Maeda 22–23),⁷⁴ Victor declares an end to all relations with the old man, and spends his days testing the “limitations that blatant force now imposed on him” (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6: 102; Stifter and Bryer 112). After managing to escape just far enough to take regular swims in the lake, Victor begins to see a thaw in his uncle’s cold demeanor. One by one, the old man unlocks the literal doors to his house and the figurative doors to his heart. As the two men – each a respective study in old age and youth – begin to understand and even feel compassion for each other, they begin once more to exchange words. In the climactic conversation set against a thunderstorm that punctuates the uncle’s stormy outbursts of emotion, the old man tells Victor why he has imprisoned him: to strengthen him not just for marriage, but also for the rural life on the estate he has rescued for him. In the end, the uncle succeeds in developing Victor’s physical and mental powers and in restoring his inheritance; however, he fails to win Victor’s love by force and to turn him into the son he never had. Thus, while Victor “triumphantly” celebrates his wedding to his foster-sister, the uncle cannot bring himself to attend despite several requests on his nephew’s part. Instead, he sits alone on his island, “for, as he himself had once said, everything, everything was too late, and something once missed could not be made up for” (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6: 142; Stifter and Bryer 158).

One of the most poignant expressions of the uncle’s brooding obsession with the past are his collections of dusty things, which occupy cluttered “cabinets of curiosities” (Arnold-de Simine; Adamy 86). These rooms vainly try to freeze time, in much the same way the old man tries to preserve his food under glass and in locked cabinets (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6: 78; Seidler 7). In fact, the uncle attempts to conserve his things with such fervor that despite his collections’ lack of organization (Grätz 97; Arnold-de Simine 48–49), he resembles not just a collector of plundered curiosities, but also a museum curator. The failure to recognize the uncle as both collector and curator stems from a disregard for his role as a storyteller and transmitter of the near-forgotten oral history of Victor’s family (Arnold-de Simine 48). What is at stake in the uncle’s collections is thus not “the stabilization of his own identity” (“die Stabilisierung seiner eigenen Identität”) (Arnold-de Simine 49) – for that, he tells Victor, it is “too late” (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6: 122). Rather, by requiring Victor to visit the island and view his collections, the uncle attempts to save his nephew’s identity from the generational oblivion that his lack of marriage prospects makes likely. In the face of this threat, which I liken to a very literal “moment of danger” (“Augenblick einer Gefahr”) (Benjamin, Arendt, and Zohn 255; Benjamin and Schweppenhäuser 1.2: 695), what is essential to the “stabilization” of Victor’s

⁷³ As Attanucci writes, bureaucracy is “a field of organization in which bachelors play an essential role” [“ein Feld der Organisation, in dem Junggesellen eine wesentliche Rolle spielen[.]”].

⁷⁴ The uncle’s island is part of a long tradition of utopian islands, which like Rousseau’s Island of Saint Pierre in the middle of Lake Bienne are both “refuge [and] perpetual prison”. Ai Meida sums up this relationship when he asks, “[I]s not the golden island itself, located in the middle of the sea, a reverse image of the prison or the penal colony?”

memory and identity is not just the rescue of his parents' memory and oral history; more important is the survival of Victor's "generational memory" ("Generationengedächtnis") (Reinhardt 25), which his uncle urges him to secure through the "recognition of genealogical orders" ("Anerkennung ... genealogischer Ordnungen") (Vedder 22).

My claim that *Der Hagestolz* shares certain similarities with Benjamin's historical materialist attempt to capture "an image of the past [...] as it unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger" ("ein Bild der Vergangenheit [...], wie es sich im Augenblick einer Gefahr dem historischen Subjekt unversehens einstellt") (Benjamin, Arendt, and Zohn 255; Benjamin and Schweppenhäuser 1.2: 695) is not without peril given the "*sui generis*" nature of Benjamin's thought and, in particular, his notion of the "dialectical image" ("das dialektische Bild") (Pensky, "Method and Time: Benjamin's Dialectical Images" 195). Despite the risk of misusing Benjamin's ideas and overlooking the essential differences between his project and Stifter's text, I find it striking that in the contexts of history, memory and forgetting, both writers use the word *Bild* ("image") in a similar way. While for Stifter, *Bild* denotes the literal portrait of Victor's deceased father, this object also becomes a metonymic vessel in which the dead man's memory is preserved. As such, this literal *Bild* has a similar function as Benjamin's "true image of the past" ("das wahre Bild der Vergangenheit"), which threatens to "flit by" into oblivion if it is not seized "as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized" (Benjamin, Arendt, and Zohn 255). As I hope to show, both Stifter's literal portrait and Benjamin's dialectical image contain what the latter called "a *weak* messianic power" ("schwache messianische Kraft") and a promise, however faint, of redemption (Benjamin, Arendt, and Zohn 254).

Although Benjamin elaborated no unified or consistent theory of the dialectical image in his work (Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics* 212), he used this term to refer on the one hand to "a radically new *method* for the conduct of a new mode of critical materialist historiography," and on the other to describe "a radically alternative conception of *time* and of historical experience" (Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics* 179). Using the dialectical image as a method, the historical materialist "[scavenged] the detritus of history for those objects that resist incorporation into a triumphal story of capitalism as endless progress and that therefore express (in their very quality as trash) the frustrated utopian fantasies of a particular generation" (Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics* 187). The resulting "constellation" formed from these remembered historical commodities such as outmoded gadgets, furnishings, and antiques – i.e. the same things collected by both the uncle and the narrator of "The Fleamarket" ("Der Tandelmarkt") – had the potential, Benjamin thought, to arrest thinking "in a configuration pregnant with tensions" ("in einer von Spannungen gesättigten Konstellation"). This constellation would then "[give] that configuration a shock, by which it crystalizes into a monad". For

da erteilt es derselben einen Chock, durch den es sich als Monade kristallisiert. Der historische Materialist geht an einen geschichtlichen Gegenstand einzig und allein da heran, wo er ihm als Monade entgegentritt. In dieser Struktur erkennt er das Zeichen einer messianischen Stillstehung des Geschehens, anders gesagt, einer revolutionären Chance im Kampfe für die unterdrückte Vergangenheit. Er nimmt sie wahr, um eine bestimmte Epoche aus dem homogenen Verlauf der Geschichte herauszusprenge; so sprengt er ein bestimmtes Leben aus der Epoche, so ein bestimmtes Werk aus dem Lebenswerk. Der Ertrag seines Verfahrens besteht darin, daß *im* Werk das Lebenswerk, *im* Lebenswerk die Epoche und *in* der Epoche der gesamte Geschichtsverlauf aufbewahrt

ist und aufgehoben. Die nahrhafte Frucht des historisch Begriffenen hat die Zeit als den kostbaren, aber des Geschmacks entratenden Samen in ihrem *Innern*. (Benjamin and Schweppenhäuser 1.2: 702–703)

[a] historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history – blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework. As a result of this method the lifework is preserved in this work and at the same time cancelled; in the lifework, the era; and in the era, the entire course of history. The nourishing fruit of the historically understood contains time as a precious but tasteless seed. (Benjamin, Arendt, and Zohn 262–263)

In what Max Pensky calls “one of Benjamin’s most comprehensive (and baffling) statements of his late method” (Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics* 195), we see that the dialectical image involves not just a new historiography, but also a Messianic conception of time which in the successive thesis XVIII he calls “die Jetztzeit” (“Now-time”, or “time of the now”). This “present, which, as a model of Messianic time, comprises the entire history of mankind in an enormous abridgement” (Benjamin and Schweppenhäuser 1.2: 703),⁷⁵ is shot through with “shards” [*Splitter*] of Messianic time. It thus expresses Benjamin’s faint hope, inspired in part by the Kabbalistic concept of *tikkun olam* (“repairing the world”) (McBride 241; Plate 37), that the broken shards of the world can be reassembled and a minimal redemption achieved for humanity through the remembrance and redeployment of the past’s revolutionary potential. Benjamin likened this moment of remembrance to an “awakening” from the “dream-filled sleep” of capitalism (Benjamin and Tiedemann 391),⁷⁶ since it marked a Marxist victory in the “fight for the oppressed past” that had been marginalized by totalitarian ideologies and “their tendency to forget – or to mythologize – the past for the sake of creating a supposedly perfect society” (De Wilde 177). In dialectical terms, this new awakening was most intimately related to a form of remembrance, with Benjamin’s method of constructing dialectical images representing “a new form of critical memory” (Pensky, “Method and Time: Benjamin’s Dialectical Images” 188). The salvific potential (De Wilde 183) of this new form of memory involved a dialectical moment in which the past and present were brought together in a unique “image” “blasted” out of the “homogenous course of history.” For Benjamin, the arresting “shock” produced by this “unique experience with the past” (“eine Erfahrung mit ihr, die einzig dasteht”) could interrupt the seemingly “‘eternal’ image of the past” (“das ‘ewige’ Bild der Vergangenheit”) (Benjamin and Schweppenhäuser 1.2: 702) through which the totalitarian state legitimized itself.

In reading the uncle’s portrait as the “image” with which Victor has a distinctly “unique experience,” I build on the pioneering work of Kathrin Maurer, who has applied Benjamin’s thoughts on history and memory to Stifter’s work. As Maurer shows, the names collected by the narrator’s grandfather in the novella *Granite (Granit)* (1848) are “storehouses and archives” that

⁷⁵ “Die Jetztzeit, die als Modell der messianischen in einer ungeheueren Abbeviatur die Geschichte der ganzen Menschheit zusammenfaßt, fällt haarscharf mit der Figur zusammen, die die Geschichte der Menschheit im Universum macht.”

⁷⁶ “Capitalism was a natural phenomenon with which a new dream-filled sleep came over Europe, and, through it, a reactivation of mythic forces.”

attempt to “protect the traces” of a mythical, “granite” past from oblivion (Maurer 3). Engaging in what she calls a “poetics of collecting,” *Granit* “belongs to a type of historical counter-prose that writes against the paradigm of the grand narrative, temporality, and teleology of academic historicism” (Maurer 14). As such, Stifter’s text privileges “modes of remembering the past that are excluded from academic historicism,” such as oral storytelling, myth, and a self-referential attitude towards language that “not only draws the reader’s attention to the text’s artful composition and to the potential problems involved in trying to reproduce reality within a literary form[;] it also causes semantic cracks, ruptures, and instabilities” within language (Maurer 5). As I hope to show, Maurer’s ideas have great relevance for *Der Hagestolz*, which – much in the spirit of Benjamin – also exhibits a skepticism towards language and historicism.

The second part of my argument concerns Stifter’s reverence for what Rilke called “the things of our daily dealings and use” (“die Dinge unseres Umgangs und Gebrauchs”) (Rilke, Sieber-Rilke, and Sieber 334).⁷⁷ As critics have long noted, Stifter shared Rilke’s later conviction that almost every thing could be a vessel [*Gefäß*] in which our forebears discovered and preserved human experience (“Menschliches vorfanden und hinzusparten”) (Rilke, Sieber-Rilke, and Sieber 335; Koch 3).⁷⁸ Indeed, Rilke’s words recall passages in Stifter where seemingly worthless “plunder and bric-a-brac” (“Plunder und Trödel”), such as that found in his essay “The Fleamarket” (*Der Tandelmarkt*), speak to us more clearly of what is “closest and dearest to our heart” (“was uns das unmittelbarste und herzigste ist”), namely “the daily life of our forebears” (“von dem alltäglichen Alltagsleben unserer Voreltern”) (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 9.1: 228). It is this potential of things to contain and preserve human experience that is also at stake for the uncle in *Der Hagestolz*. This is especially true of the portrait of Victor’s father, which forms the centerpiece of the old man’s collections. The scenes in which the uncle shows Victor the portrait and tells him the story of his father’s life thus represent an attempt to save three intertwined pasts from oblivion: his own, his deceased brother’s and Victor’s. Moreover, when the uncle relates the past to Victor and tries to steer him towards a utopian future, he attempts to interrupt “the ‘eternal’ image of the past” through which the (Austro-Hungarian) state legitimizes itself. One sees this in the uncle’s condemnation of Victor’s future career as a state bureaucrat and his exhortation to become a farmer, “as the ancient Romans liked to be” (“wie es auch die alten Römer gerne gewesen sind”) (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6: 124). For it is the fulfillment of this ahistorical utopian vision that serves as a moment of seeming redemption for Victor and his new bride Hanna, who by the end of the narrative appear to have been rescued from a stiflingly idyllic world characterized by “homogenous and empty time” (“homogene und leere Zeit”) (Benjamin and Schweppenhäuser 1.2: 701). Yet by pointing to the poetic artifice that enables such an idealized ending, Stifter ultimately casts doubt upon the possibility of such messianic intervention.

That *Der Hagestolz* also casts doubt on the possibility of all memory, even generational memory, can be seen in the desert metonyms of dust and sand. Although metonymy has not always been clearly defined (Bredin 47), it is usually understood as a trope based upon relations of “contiguity” (Jakobson 115), whereas metaphor is based upon relations of “similarity.” In other words, metonymy is “the substitution of one verbal expression for another, whenever the expressions are related to one another within a web of connotative associations” or a “cluster of semantic associations” (Bredin 49). Two common metonymical relations are that of Container /

⁷⁷ These lines, and those that follow, are taken from the well-known letter to Rilke’s Polish translator Witold Hulewicz written in November 1925. In it, Rilke explains what he tried to accomplish in the *Duino Elegies*.

Contained (e.g. “A boiling kettle”) and Place / Object in Place (“Wall Street panicked”) (Bredin 48). These are the relations we see at work in the metonyms of dust and sand, two things both contained by and found in the desert. While these relations might seem banal or even “ham-fisted” (Freedgood 12), their conventionality is the source of metonymy’s peculiar rhetorical and speculative force. For by “[telling] us what we already know by habit and convention” (Freedgood 12), metonymy can simultaneously destabilize the very values, prejudices and inherited knowledge it “retains and expresses” (Bredin 58). This what Elaine Freedgood means when she writes that the things in many Victorian novels threaten “to disrupt categories, to open up too many possibilities, to expose things hidden” (Freedgood 14). Roman Jakobson hints at something similar when he stresses the importance of this digressive aspect for “the Realist author” who uses metonymy “[to digress] from the plot to the atmosphere and from the characters to the setting in space and time” (Jakobson 130).

While the exact nature of Stifter’s “artificial” (Becker and Grätz) or “reluctant” (Bott 65–77) realism remains the topic of some debate, many have observed that Stifter pays close attention to the everyday objects, “things” [*Dinge*] and “devices” [*Geräthe*] that surround his characters and at times even seem to “usurp” their human existence (Klüger 109). W.G. Sebald, for example, calls particular attention to Stifter’s descriptions of women’s clothing, which for him indicate a pathological sexual fetish (Sebald 32–33; Pages 216). Setting aside such questions of pathology, we can see that Stifter himself uses the word “fetishes” [*Fetische*] to criticize “the inner emptiness” [*die innere Leere*] of those well-to-do Viennese who ignore an object’s essential value – what Marx would soon call its “use value” [*Gebrauchswert*] – and instead prize its market or, in Marxist terms, “exchange value” [*Tauschwert*] (Bischoff 96–97). Despite openly criticizing the Viennese and their “fetish cult,” Stifter fails to draw a clear line between their materialistic attitude towards things and his own “reverence for things” (“Ehrfurcht vor den Dingen”), which appears to be fetishism in all but name (Bischoff 99).

In this chapter, I wish to elide this somewhat unproductive question of Stifter’s “fetishism” and attempt what Elaine Freedgood calls a “strong, literalizing, or materializing, metonymic reading” of *Der Hagestolz* (Freedgood 12) Such a reading investigates an object “in terms of its own properties and history” and reconfigures it “alongside and athwart the novel’s manifest or dominant narrative – the one that concerns its subjects” (Freedgood 12). With this in mind, I take Stifter’s dust and sand very literally. Stifter’s text invites this reading not only because dust and sand appear so concretely as materials and settings; they are also imbued with something akin to life, which enhances their “ostensive” presence. This supports Sebald’s observation that Stifter’s prose exhibits a “peculiar objectivism” [*eigenartiger Objektivismus*] which

verschreibt sich den Dingen in der Hoffnung auf Dauer und macht doch gerade durch solche Identifikation in ihnen den Zerfall der Zeit sichtbar. Die Häuser, das Mobiliar, die Gerätschaften, die Kleider, die vergilbten Briefe, all diese beschriebenen Dinge, die aus der kompakten Monotonie der Erzählungen Stifters herausragen, bezeugen zuletzt nichts als ihr eigenes Dasein. (Sebald 18–19)

devotes itself to things in the hope that they will last and yet precisely through this identification makes visible in them the ravages of time. The houses, the furniture, the utensils, the clothes, the yellowed letters: all of the things that leap out of the compact monotony of Stifter’s stories in the end testify to nothing but their own existence.

Even when they are “yellowed,” and especially when they are dusty, Stifter’s things testify so persistently to their existence that they at times return the gaze of the reader and the characters alike. Take, for example, the following scene in which Victor packs his belongings for the journey to his uncle’s island:

Die Laden und Fächer der Kästen waren heraus gerissen und leer, und ihr Inhalt lag außen auf ihnen herum: [...] Dinge, die teils in den Koffer gepackt werden sollten, teils in das Wanderränzchen gehörten, das schon geöffnet auf einem Sessel lag und wartete – [...] nur die Bücher standen in den Schreinen und harrten auf ihren Gebrauch.

Victor sah das alles an, aber er tat nichts. Statt einzupacken, setzte er sich auf einen Stuhl, der in der Ecke des Zimmers stand, und drückte den Spitz an sein Herz. Dann blieb er sitzen.

Die Klänge der Turmuhr kamen durch die offenen Fenster herein, wie sie die Stunde ausschlug, aber Victor wußte nicht, die wievielte es sei – [...] die Uhr schlug wieder: aber der Jüngling saß immer auf dem Stuhle und der Hund saß vor ihm und schaute ihn unbeweglich an. (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6: 28)

The drawers of the chests had been pulled out and were empty, and their contents lay round about: [...] some of these things were to be packed in the suitcase, while others belonged in the knapsack that was already open and lay waiting on a chair; [...] only the books were still standing in the bookcases, waiting to be read.

Victor looked at all this but did nothing. Instead of packing, he sat down on a chair that stood in the corner of the room and pressed his dog Spitz to his heart. And there he remained.

The chimes of the clock tower striking the hour came in through the open windows but Victor didn’t know what time it was – [...] the clock struck once more: but the young man remained sitting there on his chair, and in front of him the dog sat motionless, looking at him. (Stifter and Bryer 26–27. Translation modified)

Despite giving the reader no immediate access to Victor’s thoughts or feelings, the narrator provides an “indirect characterization” (Adamy 87) of Victor’s emotional state through the description of the empty and “ripped out” dresser drawers. As the reader soon learns, these items reflect Victor’s emptiness of all memory of his parents and his sadness at being uprooted from his home (Sebald 19).⁷⁹ This emotional correspondence grows even stronger as the narrator imbues Victor’s things with something akin to life: his rucksack “waits for” [*wartete*] the imminent journey, while his books “await” [*harrten auf*] their later, more uncertain use. Perhaps what testifies most to these things’ individual existence is their uncanny ability to stare back at Victor, something that gives him pause and compels him to return their gaze. Instead of packing,

⁷⁹ For Sebald, this “allegory of the emptied inner world, which leaves nothing but the bitterness of disappointment, is the averted side of Stifter’s materialism, which in the prosaic descriptions of visible reality allows for a note of fear that everything could be lost tomorrow - not just the love to another person, but also what we have created around us” (“Die Allegorie der ausgeräumten Innenwelt, die nichts übrig läßt als die Bitterkeit der Enttäuschung, ist die abgewandte Seite des Stifterschen Materialismus, der in den prosaischen Beschreibungen der sichtbaren Wirklichkeit die Angst mitschwingen läßt, es könne schon morgen alles verloren sein - nicht nur die Liebe zu einem anderen Menschen, sondern auch das, was wir um uns hergestellt haben[.]”).

he sits down in the corner of the room and loses himself in their contemplation for an unspecified amount of time. After being shaken from his reverie by the sound of footsteps on the stairs, Victor at last packs his clothes, valuables and assorted keepsakes. But even now his near empty room stares back at him as though “devastated” [*verwüstet*]:

Als er nun mit allem fertig war, schaute er noch einmal in dem Zimmer und and den Wänden herum, ob nichts liege oder hänge, was noch eingepackt werden müsse: aber es war nichts mehr da, und die Stube blickte ihn verwüstet an. Unter dem Gewirre der fremden Dinge und der ebenfalls gleichsam fremdgewordenen Geräte stand das einzige Bett noch, wie bisher; aber auf ihm lag verunreinigender Staub[.] So stand er eine Weile. [...] Victor [...] wischte sich mit der flachen Hand und mit dem Tucho den Schweiß von der Stirne, nahm eine Bürste, die da lag, fegte damit den Staub von seinen Kleidern und stieg dann die Treppe hinab. (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6: 30)

With everything now finished, he looked around him in the room and at the walls to see if there wasn't something lying about or hanging up that remained to be packed, but there was nothing more and the room stared back at him with a devastated look. Still standing among the jumble of unfamiliar objects and equally unfamiliar effects was the one bed, but this, too, had been soiled with dust[.] He stood there for a moment. [...] Victor [...] wiped the sweat from his forehead with the flat of his hand and his handkerchief, picked up a brush lying there, brushed the dust from his clothes and went downstairs. (Stifter and Bryer 28. Translation modified)

The pathos and reproach in the words, “and the room stared back at him with a devastated look” [*und die Stube blickte ihn verwüstet an*], carry the weight of an accusation; it is as though the bedroom were accusing Victor not just of figurative, but also of literal “devastation” [*Verwüstung*]: of making it a “desert” [*Wüste*] by surrendering it to the encroaching “sands,” as it were, of the “soiling dust” [*verunreinigender Staub*]. The narrator makes no secret of his dislike for this polluting substance, which has spread as far as Victor's bed, the last familiar thing remaining among the “jumble of unfamiliar objects and equally unfamiliar effects” [*Gewirre der fremden Dinge und der ebenfalls gleichsam fremdgewordenen Geräte*]. The dust also both fascinates and disturbs Victor, who after staring at it a while wipes it from his clothes and goes downstairs. But what is it exactly about it that so unsettles the narrator, Victor and, later, his uncle, whom the reader soon encounters also brushing dust from his things?

On this point, Eric Santner's thoughts on Sebald are helpful. For Santner, dust “may well be Sebald's most privileged, most emblematic object; it is everywhere present [...] and [...] serves as the single most poignant embodiment of death, decay and transience in his writings. We might even say it is Sebald's emblem for materiality as such” (Santner 99–100). Santner goes so far as to call “Sebald's entire project [...] an effort to tease out the testimony of dust and ash, to see in such material deposits the very ‘matter’ of historical depositions” (Santner 102). Indeed, despite the recent judgment that Stifter was “wholly uninterested in one of the central concerns of Sebald's prose fiction, namely memory and the commemoration of traumatic experiences and historical catastrophes” (Pages 215), Stifter in fact shares with Sebald not only a fascination for geological processes (Ireton and Schaumann 193–209), but also for dust and sand, two of Sebald's most “privileged substances” (Santner 102; Sebald and Hulse 227–229). In *Der Hagestolz*, dust and sand function literally, metonymically, and – as I discuss in the final section

of this chapter – poetologically. They not only play an important literal role as modifiers (“soiling dust” / *verunreinigender Staub* etc.) and settings (“sandy forecourt” / *Sandplatz*). They also allow Stifter to digress metonymically from his plot and characters to address larger questions of memory, history and poetics.

In my analysis of how these metonyms work in *Der Hagestolz*, I find it helpful to recall Heidegger’s remarks on Nietzsche’s poem “Among Daughters of the Desert” [*Unter Töchtern der Wüste*]. By placing these texts into conversation with one another, I wish to highlight the ways in which Stifter’s desert prefigures what Heidegger calls a “devastation [...] more unearthly than destruction” [*Verwüstung ... unheimlicher als Zerstörung*]. As Heidegger writes,

[d]ie Zerstörung beseitigt nur das bisher Gewachsene und Gebaute; die Verwüstung aber unterbindet künftiges Wachstum und verwehrt jedes Bauen. Die Verwüstung ist kein bloßes Versanden. Die Verwüstung ist die auf hohen Touren laufende Vertreibung der Mnemosyne. (Heidegger, *Was heisst Denken?* 18)

[d]estruction only sweeps aside all that has grown up or been built so far; but devastation blocks all future growth and prevents all building. [...] Mere destruction sweeps aside all things including even nothingness. [...] Devastation does not just mean a slow sinking into the sands. Devastation is the high velocity expulsion of Mnemosyne. (Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?* 29–30)

Heidegger’s remarks on the “devastation” [*Verwüstung*] and expulsion [*Vertreibung*] of Mnemosyne seem to me to be a key to understanding the closing passage of *Der Hagestolz*. There, the uncle, whom Adamy calls “a monolith in erosion” [*ein Monolith in der Erosion*] (Adamy 94), literally “sinks” into the sandy ground of his (desert) island home, just as the half-forgotten “refuse of years past” [*Wegwurf vergangener Jahre*] in Stifter’s essay “The Antiquities” [*Die Alterthümer*] also “sink” into oblivion (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.5: 16). Stifter thus equates the uncle’s sinking “devastation” with his premature “eradication” [*Austilgung*] from generational memory and cosmic history. This uncanny deployment of the desert figure concludes the text’s sustained reflections on memory. These center on the uncle’s role as the curator of Victor’s past. In the following section, I will examine the interdependent relationship between the uncle and Victor, the only visitor to the old man’s “museum of memory.” In doing so, I will pay close attention to Stifter’s “strongly literal” metonyms of the desert.

The relationship between Victor and his uncle, marked by radical difference and uncanny similarity, is established at the start of the opening chapter, “A Contrast” [*Gegenbild*]. As Victor and his friends walk through a serene alpine landscape, the beauty of the idyllic scene is interrupted by a sudden cry of despair: “‘It is now for all eternity quite certain that I will never marry’ [*Es ist nun für alle Ewigkeit ganz gewiß, daß ich nie heiraten werde*]” (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6: 13). With this lament, the reader first meets Victor, whose youthful beauty and strength cannot offset the lack of inheritance that makes his marriage prospects unlikely. The orphan ward of Ludmilla, a linen weaver, Victor has secured through natural talent and hard work an unspecified post [*Amt*] for which he must now leave his stepmother’s idyllic home. This position is closely intertwined with Victor’s marriage prospects, as we learn when Ludmilla mentions Rosina, the daughter of Victor’s legal guardian:

‘Siehst du, Victor, Rosina könntest du einmal zu deiner Frau bekommen, wenn du in deinem Berufe recht tätig bist. Sie ist sehr schön, und denke, wie ihr Vater mächtig ist. Er hat die lästige Vormundschaft über dich sehr redlich und fleißig verwaltet, und ist dir nicht abgeneigt; [...] Dein Vater könnte jetzt auch so hoch sein, oder hoch höher; denn er hat einen gewaltigen Geist gehabt, den sie nur nicht kannten. Deine eigene leibliche Mutter hat ihn nicht einmal gekannt. Und er ist gut gewesen, so sehr gut, daß ich jetzt noch manchmal daran denke, wie er gar so gut gewesen ist. Deine Mutter ist auch recht lieb und fromm gewesen, nur ist sie viel zu frühe für dich gestorben.’ (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6: 27)

‘See now, Victor, if you work hard at your profession, you might well marry Rosina one day. She is very beautiful, and think what a powerful man her father is. He has carried out the burdensome role of guardian in a just and diligent manner and is fond of you[.] [...] Your father might now have been as highly placed, or higher even, for had a strong intellect, but this was simply not recognized. Not even your own blood mother recognized it. And he was good, so very good that even now I sometimes find myself thinking what a really good man he was. Your mother, too, was a dear and pious woman, but she died when you were so young, far too young. (Stifter and Bryer 24–25)

Although Victor is intelligent and hard working, any success in career and marriage he might have depends on the arbitrary favor of his guardian, a contingent and unenviable position that threatens to limit his vast potential. As we later learn, these hindrances are similar to those that shaped the fate of his father, Hippolit, who was forced into an unwanted marriage in order to save the life and reputation of a family friend driven to the brink of suicide by financial scandal. For now, however, the text underscores two key aspects of Victor’s relationship to his parents. First, there is the similarity he bears to Hippolit, which is said to be intellectual, but later will appear as an exact physical resemblance. Ludmilla tells us that Victor has inherited his father’s “powerful intellect,” which unlike during his lifetime, has been recognized in his son and rewarded with a suitable position. We also learn that both of Victor’s parents died when he was too young to form any memory of them. Instead, Victor must make do with Ludmilla’s banal reminiscences, which do little to fill the gap in his memory that his parents’ absence has left behind. As a result of this inner emptiness, Victor tells his foster sister Hanna that he is “indescribably unhappy” [*unbeschreiblich unglücklich*] (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6: 45) because he has “no one in the whole wide world, no father, no mother, no sister” [*gar niemand auf der ganzen großen weiten Erde, keinen Vater, keine Mutter, keine Schwester*] (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6: 46). Victor’s lament has much to do with the insecure financial situation he has inherited from his father, since this is the first thing he mentions. But what troubles him even more is that he must now leave the only two people who are “kind” to him or, more literally, “do good things for him” (*die [ihm] Gutes tun*): that is to say, those who have given him good emotional experiences and fond memories, two things of which his parents have left no trace. This void of memory and experience is at the root of Victor’s despair, and he can only define happiness as that which is not there (Wessel 171). As he tells Hanna, he feels

‘[d]aß alles vorüber ist, und daß ich der einsamste Mensch auf Erden bin. [...] Ich werde nie heiraten – es kann nicht sein - - es wird nicht möglich werden. Du siehst, also, ich

werde keine Heimat haben, ich gehöre niemanden an; die anderen werden mich vergessen – und es ist gut. (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6: 46–47)

‘that everything is over and I am the loneliest person on earth. [...] I will never marry – it cannot be - - it won’t be possible. You see, then, that I will never have a home, I belong to no one; the others will forget me – and that’s fine.’

The sentiment that things are already “too late” or “all over” before they have begun is a prominent theme in this text and, indeed, in much of Stifter’s life (Matz, *Adalbert Stifter oder Diese fürchterliche Wendung der Dinge* 87).⁸⁰ Here, Stifter uses such language to lament Victor’s lack of a home [*Heimat*], one both literal and figurative. His lack of property is the material condition that makes his marriage prospects unlikely, but intertwined with his material poverty is his lack of biological family and the feelings of belonging that come with it. Victor resigns himself not just to the material impossibility of marriage and family, but also to his own generational oblivion, since without children his generational memory will disappear into the steady stream of time and the apparent indifference of what Eugene Thacker calls the “world-without-us” (Thacker 4–5; Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6, 19; Reinhardt 25).⁸¹ Such non-, even post-human forces are present on the first day the reader encounters Victor, just as his last day at home brings “nothing unusual” [*nichts Ungewöhnliches*] (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6: 40). As we have seen, living within such monotonous confines causes Victor no small amount of “boredom” [*lange Weile*].⁸² Yet as he tells Hanna, neither his boredom nor his poverty is the root cause of his unhappiness. What makes him so “indescribably unhappy” is the loneliness caused by having no memory of his parents. This feeling of emptiness, which might well be described as existential solitude, coupled with his precarious finances, convinces Victor that he will never marry, never have a family, and thus be erased from generational memory.

This is Victor’s unfortunate state of mind as he arrives on his uncle’s island and meets his only living blood relative. However, even before this scene the narrator has already introduced the uncle as the contrasting *Gegenbild* to Victor and his friends. Instead of the lively camaraderie of youth, the narrator describes geographic and emotional isolation. Not only does the old man live on a remote island, but he permits no one to visit or even look at him. Presenting him as the both the jailer and the lone inmate of a self-made prison, the narrator underscores the uncle’s isolation through the repetition of the word *selbst* (“himself”) in the description of the silence within the old man’s house: “It was very silent in the house and, whenever he chanced to go in, he locked the door himself, and whenever he came out, he opened it again himself” (“In dem Hause war es sehr schweigsam, und wenn er zufällig hineinging, schloß er die Tür selbst, und wenn er herausging, öffnete er sie wieder selbst”) (Stifter and Bryer 15; Stifter, *Werke und Briefe*

⁸⁰ See, for example, the letter Stifter wrote to Fanny Greipl on November 15, 1829.

⁸¹ For Thacker, “the world-without-us is the subtraction of the human from the world” (5). This world neither cares about, nor is indifferent to human concerns, since “[t]o say that the world-without-us is antagonistic to the human is to attempt to put things in human terms, in the terms of the world-for-us.” This Thacker defines as “the world in which we live [...]”; “the world that we, as human beings, interpret and give meaning to, the world that we relate to or feel alienated from, the world that we are at once part of and that is also separate from the human” (5). To be sure, this describes Victor’s relationship to the world. However, the novella also postulates a world in which “everything, everything perishes,” including, potentially, the world itself. Its apocalyptic rhetoric, while Christian in origin, is distinctly devoid of theology or redemption.

⁸² Wessel 171.

1.6: 18).⁸³ In a manner that recalls Victor's own loneliness, the narrator describes the uncle's solitude in negative terms:

Weil er kein Weib gehabt hatte, saß an dem Tage keine alte Gefährtin neben ihm auf der Bank, so wie an allen Orten, wo er vor der Erwerbung des Inselhauses gewesen sein mag, nie eine Gattin bei ihm war. Er hatte nie Kinder gehabt und nie eine Qual oder Freude an Kindern erlebt, es trat daher keines in den Schatten, den er von der Bank auf den Sand warf. (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6, 18)

Since he had never married, no female companion had sat with him that day on the bench, nor in all the other places he may have been before he acquired his island house; never had he had the company of a wife. He had never had children, never been pestered or delighted by them, and so none hovered there in the shadow he cast from the bench onto the sand. (Stifter and Bryer 14)

By using three different words for wife – “Weib,” “Gefährtin,” and “Gattin” – the narrator repeatedly draws attention to the fact that the uncle never married nor had children. More interestingly, the narrator links old man's childlessness to two figures of death. The first, “shadow” [*Schatten*], is a stock image. Yet “sand,” the second, is not. As one of Stifter's privileged metonyms, it does double duty: it describes the literal “sandy forecourt” [*Sandplatz*] in front of the uncle's house, and gestures towards the literal “devastation,” or “desertification” of the old man's generational memory. This is the very “thought of dying” that makes him “tremble” (“Der Greis [...] zitterte vor dem Sterben.”) (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6, 18).

The uncanny resemblance between these two “contrasting images” [*Gegenbilder*] lies in their shared fear of a forgotten, childless death. This becomes more explicit when, in a later scene, the uncle urges Victor to marry:

‘Wenn ein uralter Mann auf einem Hügel manigfaltiger Taten steht, was nützt es ihm? Ich habe vieles und allerlei getan, und habe nichts davon. Alles zerfällt im Augenblicke, wenn man nicht ein Dasein erschaffen hat, das über dem Sarge noch fort dauert. Um wen bei seinem Alter Söhne, Enkel und Urenkel stehen, der wird oft tausend Jahre alt. Es ist ein vielfältig Leben derselben Art vorhanden, und wenn er fort ist, dauert das Leben doch noch immer als dasselbe, ja man merkt es nicht einmal, daß ein Teilchen dieses Lebens seitwärts ging, und nicht mehr kam. Mit meinem Tode fällt alles dahin, was ich als Ich gewesen bin. - - - Darum mußt du heiraten, Victor, und mußt sehr jung heiraten.] (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6, 122–123)

When an ancient old man stands on top of a hill made up of a whole welter of his life's deeds, what good is that to him? I have done many and various things and have nothing to show for them. Everything falls apart in a moment if you haven't created a life that lasts beyond the grave. That man around whom, in his old age, sons, grandsons and great-grandsons stand will often live to be a thousand. There is a diversity of life there but of the same stamp and when he is gone, then that same life continues – indeed you don't even notice that a small part of that life has stepped to one side and is no longer there. At

⁸³ Translation modified.

my death everything that I have been, that I am, will perish ... which is why you must marry, Victor, marry very young. (Stifter and Bryer 136)

To be sure, the stress the uncle places on biological reproduction sets him apart somewhat from Victor, who expresses a similar anxiety (e.g. “I belong to no one”), but never explicitly refers to children, only to his parents and future wife. However, given Rosmarie Hunter’s assertion that Stifter’s child characters often “enrich” their parents’ lives and symbolize a “link in the generational chain” [*Glied in der Generationskette*] (Hunter 278), Victor’s “no one” can reasonably extend to the matter of children. Indeed, the uncle’s description of sons, grandsons and great-grandsons surrounding a man “who will often live to be a thousand” implies that children form succeeding links in the generational chain. These descendants make up a generational memory that guarantees a continuation of life after death: “a life that lasts beyond the grave.” And yet even this seemingly “immortal” form of memory is thoroughly precarious. Despite giving rise to “a diversity of life [...] of the same stamp” [*ein vielfältig Leben derselben Art*], the generational chain is also subject to a near imperceptible erosion whereby one does not even notice “that a small part of that life has stepped to one side and is no longer there.” This idea that even one of the more lasting forms of memory is subject to slow decay anticipates the apocalyptic rhetoric of the text’s final scene, in which “everything, everything perishes, even the greatest and those things that give most joy” [“alles, alles untergeht, selbst das Größte und das Freudigste”], and the uncle will perish sooner because “his life has left no copy of itself” (“weil sein Dasein kein Bild geprägt hat”) (Stifter and Bryer 159; Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6, 142). This explains the old man’s regret that, “[a]t my death everything that I have been, that I am, will perish ...” (“Mit meinem Tode fällt alles dahin, was ich als Ich gewesen bin - - - .”); he knows that his childless death will bring an abrupt end to everything he ever was in life, above all to his very subjectivity. This awareness forms the core of what Erica and Martin Swales call his “tragedy of individuation” (Swales and Swales 48), the knowledge that human existence is “tragically limited by death” (“tragisch durch den Tod begrenzt”) (Hunter 277). In the worlds of Stifter’s prose, children can temporarily alleviate this tragic condition by enriching the lives of their parents in the here-and-now (Hunter 278), bringing comfort that “a diversity of life [...] of the same stamp” will live on for a thousand years through the generational chain. But children can never prevent the dissolution of the subject into the “realm of pure [nothingness]” that is death (Ragg-Kirkby 218), in the same way that “inter-generational transfer and continuation” [*intergenerationelle Übertragungen und Kontinuierung*] can never be more than “precarious antagonists to death” (“prekäre Gegenfiguren zum Tod”) (Parnes, Vedder, and Willer 165). It is no accident that in the above passage the uncle’s language breaks down into an ellipsis marked by four successive hyphens. This textual rupture points to a realm beyond the power of words where language dies along with the subject. As though aware of this abyss, the uncle advises Victor to follow the only course of action that will establish “the ideal condition for the development of the individual for his own sake” (“die ideale Voraussetzung für die Entwicklung des einzelnen um seiner selbst willen”) (Hunter 278), and slow the erosion of his generational memory: marry. “[This] is why you must marry, Victor, marry very young. And that is why you must also have enough breathing space for you to be able to stretch all of your limbs” (“Darum mußt du heiraten, Victor, und mußt sehr jung heiraten. Darum mußt du auch Luft und Raum haben, um alle deine Glieder rühren zu können.”) (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6, 123). The semantic emptiness to which the article “that” [*das*] in *Darum* refers can never be filled adequately by language. All the uncle knows for sure is that this unnamable despair has filled his

life with anguish, regret, and a profound feeling of life's ephemerality. It has also informed his very practical decision to rescue his nephew's inheritance to ensure that Victor has the material conditions in which he can "stretch all of his limbs."

This "wordless zone" to which the uncle's words can only point is the same that in many of Stifter's works finds expression in the desert, "a realm of the natural world that is radically beyond (and resistant to) the ordering will of men and women" (Ragg-Kirkby 207). While no desert appears explicitly in *Der Hagestolz*, I have already noted two metonyms that gesture towards it. The first of these, sand, is the place in which we first glimpse the uncle as he sits in his home's sandy forecourt [*Sandplatz*], and it is the place into which he "sinks" into oblivion at the story's end. A related metonym, dust, appears not only in Victor's bedroom, as we have seen; dust figures more prominently in the scenes that follow Victor's arrival on the island.

In this encounter, the text's *Gegenbilder* at last stand across from each other in the contrast and reciprocity that the preposition *gegen* ["against," "toward," "across" = *gegen-über*) denotes. The tension within this word corresponds to the fraught interdependence of these two textual "images" [*Bilder*]: although Victor and his uncle stand at opposite ends of life's "gallery," as it were, they share the same anxieties about memory and oblivion. Tellingly, the text presents a mixture of remembering and forgetting in the uncle's first words to Victor as the two stand on opposite sides of the monastery gate. After Victor assures his uncle that he has made the journey by foot as stipulated, and produces a letter of introduction from his guardian attesting to this fact, the old man takes the letter without reading it, saying:

‘Dein Vormund ist ein Narr und ein beschränkter Mensch. [...] [I]ch sehe, daß du deinem Vater ganz und gar gleich siehst, da er anhob, die Streiche zu machen. Ich habe dich schon über den See fahren gesehen.’

Victor, der keine rücksichtslosen Worte gehört hatte, war stumm und wartete nur, daß der andere das Gitter öffnen werde.

Dieser aber sagte: ‘Nimm eine Schnur mit einem Steine, und ertränke diesen Hund in dem See, dann komme wieder hieher, ich werde derweilen öffnen.’ (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6, 69–70)

‘Your guardian is a fool and a man of limited ability. [...] I can see that you look exactly like your father did when he started to get up to his tricks. I saw you already as you were coming across the lake.’

Victor, who had never heard a callous word in his life, was struck dumb and waited simply for the other to open the gate.

The old man, however, said: ‘Take a rope and a stone and drown that dog in the lake, then come back here; I’ll open up for you in the meantime.’ (Stifter and Bryer 74)

As in the earlier scene with Ludmilla, it is the similarity – here, physical – Victor bears to his father that triggers a memory in the speaker's mind. Whereas the text presents Ludmilla's reminiscences as trivial and undescriptive, here the narrator casts doubt on the accuracy of the uncle's memory of his brother Hippolit by calling his words "callous" or, more literally, "reckless" [*rücksichtslos*]. On one level, the uncle's words expose the recklessness of his impossible demand: since it is impossible to walk on water, Victor can go only as far as the lakeshore before completing the journey by boat. But the uncle's words are *rücksichtslos* in a more literal sense: they lack *Rücksicht* in that they do not "look back" [*zurücksehen*] on the past

with due care and accuracy. On the contrary, the uncle misremembers Hippolit as a mischief-maker because he was the more successful rival for the affections of Victor's foster mother Ludmilla, whom the uncle also wished to marry once. His words are marked not only by jealousy and the sacrifices he made to ensure that Ludmilla and Hippolit could marry, but also by a selective narrative of the past that overlooks certain details. The uncle is unable to name a reason, for example, why Ludmilla was "friendly, but not affectionate" [*freundlich, aber nicht zugeneigt*], or why she never accepted the gifts he brought back for her from his business trips, presenting her behavior as without reason [*ohne [...] einen Grund*] (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6, 127). For her part, Ludmilla attributes her inability to reciprocate the uncle's affection to his "rough and hard side" [*rauhe und harte Seite*], which made it impossible for anyone to love him [*daß ihn jemand liebe*] (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6, 137). This side of his personality not only precluded any chance to love or be loved, but set him in opposition to the "subtle," "enduring," and "preservative" forces of Stifter's "Gentle Law" [*das sanfte Gesetz*], formulated in the preface to *Many Colored Stones (Bunte Steine)* (1853) (Helmetag 184). Indeed, an early formulation of this law can be found in Ludmilla's reminiscences of the uncle:

‘Mir fiel manchesmal bei ihm der Spruch der heiligen Bücher ein, wo einmal die göttliche Gestalt erscheinen sollte: sie war nicht in dem Rollen des Donners, sie war nicht in dem Brausen des Sturmes; aber in dem Säuseln des Lüftchens war sie.’ (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6, 137)

“Many is the time I was reminded by him of the saying in the Holy Scriptures about how the Divine Form would appear one day, not in the rolling of the thunder, not in the roaring of the storm but in the rustling of the breeze[.]” (Stifter and Bryer 153)

Ludmilla's allusion to Kings 19:11–12 suggests that the uncle embodies many of the human vices later enumerated in the preface to *Bunte Steine*, such as hatred, envy, self-gratification, egotism, neglect, isolation, violent outbursts of temper, and the absence of love. Against the uncle's negative example, Stifter's text appears to present Ludmilla as an exemplary manifestation of the Gentle Law and its virtues of love, kindness, orderliness, and harmony between nature and society (Helmetag 184). This rather tidy opposition between the violator and adherent of the Gentle Law lends credence to Ludmilla's narrative of the past, and casts further aspersions on the uncle's recollections. Yet to Stifter's credit, his text does not entirely uphold such artificial clarity. To borrow a phrase from Wolfgang Matz, the reader is left with the nagging question whether the uncle might well have been a victim of the everyday "violence of the past" [*die Gewalt des Gewordenen*], "the power of the factual, even though it may be so absurd, [...] stronger than all interpretation" ("die Macht des Faktischen, sei sie auch noch so absurd, ... stärker denn alle Deutung"). In the face of this inexplicable force of contingency, there is for the victim of life's vicissitudes "not even the solace of an explanation: only the mere fact, violence of the past" ("nicht einmal den Trost einer Erklärung: nur die bloße Tatsache, Gewalt des Gewordenen") (Matz, "Gewalt des Gewordenen" 718–719). Part of what makes Stifter's text so compelling is that it leaves space for this doubt and ambiguity in spite of the didactic opposition between Ludmilla and the uncle. As in any great work that does not allow itself to be reduced to one interpretation, there is no reason why both explanations cannot stand:

the uncle's oblivion concerning his own past, and the "simple fact" of Ludmilla's rejection.⁸⁴ Complicating matters further is the uncle's paternal project of self-sacrifice for Victor, which renders facile any attempt to classify the old man simply as a selfish violator of the Gentle Law.

One final example of the uncle's forgetfulness concerning even the smallest matters appears in his demand that Victor drown his dog Spitz. After Victor refuses to comply, Christopher, his uncle's servant, entreats him to join the old man for dinner. Victor agrees only if he can guarantee that nothing will happen to the dog. "I can guarantee you that," Christopher replies. He tells Victor that "[s]uch a trifle as a dog" is "the last thing on [the uncle's] mind," but a more literal translation is that the old man "forgot" ("[D]er Herr vergaß der Geringfügigkeit eines Hundes, und wird ihm nichts anhaben") (Stifter and Bryer 81; Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6, 76). This small but revealing detail marks the uncle as prone to forget even the smallest "trifle," just as he misremembers his relationship to Victor's father.

Just as a strange mixture of care and neglect characterize the uncle's complicated relationship to the memory of his brother, so too do they reflect his attitude towards his collections. Victor notices this the first morning on the island as he watches the old man brushing the dust from his collection of stuffed birds. This dusty "still-life" (Sebald 23) betrays the obsessive traits of the uncle's zeal for collecting, traits that counteract his best efforts at preservation. He hoards things "with such persistence" [*mit solcher Beharrung*] that he simply has too many of them to look after. As a result, they lie neglected, covered in dust and doomed to slow disintegration.

This problem of having too many things to care for is not unique to the uncle's "cabinet of curiosities." Many European museums of the nineteenth century faced the same predicament. Stifter knew this personally and professionally. As an avid collector, Stifter almost certainly experienced moments when his "things" [*Sachen*] threatened to upset the strict regime of order set by his wife Amalia. Indeed, we hear an echo of such domestic drama in a revised version of "The Fleamarket" (*Der Tandelmarkt*) published in an 1846 edition of the periodical *The Collector* (*Der Sammler*). In it, the narrator's wife forces his things to "live in a box on the floor" ("in einer Kiste auf dem Boden [zu] wohnen"), which causes him to dream of building "a small, tiny little house" ("ein kleines winziges Häuschen") to contain them all (Stifter and Buxbaum 193). Aside from such personal experience, Stifter had first-hand knowledge of the difficulties posed by museum conservation. As the appointed art conservationist [*Kunstconservator*] of Upper Austria, he had "more than passing awareness of the museum world of Vienna, Linz, and Munich. This, along with "his behind-the-scenes involvement with museums and officials," taught Stifter that the preservation of cultural artifacts involves the difficult task of identifying and selecting which ones can, and should be saved with limited resources (McIsaac 95).

The difficult choices posed by this task are ones the uncle seems unwilling, or unable to make. To borrow again from Sebald, the uncle obsessively collects and accumulates things "in the hope that they will last" [*in der Hoffnung auf Dauer*], yet in a manner that makes "visible the ravages of time" [*den Zerfall der Zeit sichtbar*] (Sebald 19). Perhaps the most visible indication of these ravages is the thick dust that covers everything, from the uncle's shirt collar, to the dog collars in his collections (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6, 87). In this way, Stifter presents the uncle as both a collector and a "collectable," gathering dust and decaying like the rest of his objects. What sets him apart from them, among other things, is his fear of dying and being forgotten. This

⁸⁴ I am reminded here of Paul Valéry's definition of art, as cited by Walter Benjamin: "We recognize a work of art by the fact that no idea it inspires in us, no mode of behavior that it suggests we adopt could exhaust it or dispose of it." Benjamin, Arendt, and Zohn 187.

fear prompts him to open the doors of his “museum of memory” for the purposes of Victor’s *Bildung* [“education”]. This word’s literal meaning of “formation” is crucial to understanding the uncle’s intention *to form* within his nephew a new historical consciousness of past and present: of the parents from whom he is descended, and the man he is now. In so doing, the uncle aims to make Victor aware of the ways in which this new consciousness will alter his present moment by counteracting those larger historical forces that have predetermined his career path, guaranteed his lack of marriage prospects, and ensured his erasure from generational memory. It is in this way that the uncle’s project resembles a Benjaminian attempt to create a “consciousness of the present that explodes the continuum of history” (“Bewußtsein der Gegenwart, welches das Kontinuum der Geschichte aufsprengt”) (Benjamin and Schweppenhäuser 2.2, 468). And it is with the goal of exploding the continuum of history that he shows Victor the most important piece in his collections: the portrait of Hippolit.

Critics have remarked that Victor’s encounter with his father’s portrait comprises the “agenda” [*Programmpunkt*] of his visit to the island (Loock 38), and that the painting has the effect of awakening in him memories of a much earlier time (Höller 35). In reality, the portrait can only ever point to the void of memory within the young man. Having no recollection of either his father or his mother, Victor is nevertheless deeply affected by the portrait’s limited ability to conjure the presence of his dead father. As a mere painted image, the painting can provide the youth with only “a feeling rich with deep melancholy and yet one that also gives some bitter-sweet comfort” (“ein von einer tiefen Wehmut reiches, und doch einen traurig süßen Trost gebendes Gefühl”). It can only “point” [*wies*] towards the longstanding and unfillable absence of his flesh and blood father, about whom Victor’s thoughts are necessarily expressed in the negative statement, “Victor couldn’t imagine” (“Er konnte sich nicht vorstellen”). While Victor literally can place himself before [*sich vor-stellen*] the portrait, he still cannot “imagine” [*sich vorstellen*] his father standing above his cradle, lying in his sickbed, or being lowered into the grave. These negative memories, as it were, although present in the text, point only to the irredeemable absence within Victor’s own mind. Despite the uncle’s efforts to preserve [*bewahren*] Hippolit’s memory by keeping [*aufbewahren*] his portrait, he is unable to reawaken memories within Victor because the lad was simply too young to “retain” [*bewahren*] any impressions of the outside world (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6, 96–97).

Yet seen as a “vessel” containing the past experience of his father, the portrait offers Victor something not unlike what Benjamin calls the historical materialist’s “given experience with the past – an experience that is unique” (“jeweilige Erfahrung mit [der Vergangenheit], die einzig dasteht”) (Benjamin and Schweppenhäuser 2, 468; Benjamin, Eiland, and Jennings 262). This unique experience with the past does more than simply stir up strong emotions in Victor’s “soft heart;” it causes him to reflect on his own present moment in time and his own relationship with history. We see this in his thoughts about his father (“Er dachte, wenn er noch lebte, so würde er jetzt auch alt sein, wie der Oheim [...]”) (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6, 98)), and in his resolve to ask for the portrait, which shows that he recognizes its importance for his own historical moment. This recognition marks an essential step in what we might call Victor’s “historical materialist formation” and an initial victory for his uncle: for in the literal portrait image [*Bild*] of his father, to whom he bears an uncanny physical resemblance, Victor has recognized himself. In this way, he recognizes the “true picture of the past” (“das wahre Bild der Vergangenheit”) “as one of [his] own” (“als in ihm gemeint”) (Benjamin and Schweppenhäuser 1.2, 695; Benjamin, Arendt, and Zohn 255).

Here I should note that by using Benjamin to illuminate Stifter, I do not ignore the very different historical, literary and theoretical settings in which they lived and wrote. Nor do I claim that Victor is a dyed-in-the-wool historical materialist. My aim here is to bring Stifter and Benjamin into dialogue by exploring moments of rhetorical overlap in their texts. It is in this spirit that I dare describe Victor's new awareness in terms of what Benjamin called a "consciousness of the present moment" that holds fast to "an irretrievable image of the past that threatens to disappear with every present that does not recognize itself as intended in it" ("ein unwiederbringliches Bild der Vergangenheit, das mit jeder Gegenwart zu verschwinden droht, die sich nicht als in ihm gemeint erkannte") (Benjamin and Schweppenhäuser 1.2, 695; Benjamin, Arendt, and Zohn 255). Reading with Benjamin, we can characterize Victor's generational memory as just such an "irretrievable image of the past." Such a view has great appeal if we remember that already in the opening chapters, Victor's generational memory is in imminent danger of being erased from the course of time and history. Furthermore, the moment at which Victor becomes more "historically conscious" (although certainly not in the strict Benjaminian sense) is when he recognizes himself as the "image" intended in his father's portrait. In this moment of (self-)recognition, Victor sees the chance for what Benjamin calls a "messianic cessation of happening" [messianisch[e] Stillstehung des Geschehens"], or "a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past" ["ein[e] revolutionär[e] Chance im Kampfe für die unterdrückte Vergangenheit"] (Benjamin and Schweppenhäuser 1.2, 703; Benjamin, Arendt, and Zohn 263).

Victor's newly won consciousness of his and his father's "suppressed pasts," both of which had been concealed from him since his birth, represents the initial stage in the uncle's "messianic" project of *Bildung*. The old man enacts the next phase when he advises Victor to reject his bureaucratic post and instead to "go into farming, as the ancient Romans were happy to do; they well knew how to set about things so that all one's abilities are properly and uniformly employed" ["Ich meine, du sollst ein Landwirt sein, wie es auch die alten Römer gewesen sind, die recht gut gewußt haben, wie man es anfangen soll, daß alle Kräfte recht und gleichmäßig angeregt werden."] (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6, 124; Stifter and Bryer 137). The idea that an anachronistic rural life approximates an earthly paradise is common to Stifter and other Biedermeier writers (Adamy 96). In *Brigitta* (1844), for example, "those sturdy early Romans" ["die alten starken Römer"] are held up as exemplary figures "who also loved agricultural pursuits and who, in the early years of their history at least, were quite prepared to suffer the natural loneliness of the busy husbandman at work on his own lands ["die den Landbau auch so sehr geliebt hatten und die wenigstens in ihrer früheren Zeit auch gerne einsam und kräftig waren.]" "In its simplicity and yet diversity and in its close contact with dispassionate nature" ["In ihrer Einfalt und Mannigfaltigkeit, in dem ersten Zusammenleben mit der Natur, die leidenschaftslos ist,"], the "disposition [*Bestimmung*] of the countryman" is said to approach "the paradisaical state" [grenzt [...] zunächst an die Sage von dem Paradiese."] (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.5, 437; Stifter, *Brigitta* 34). In *Der Hagestolz*, this "originary" and harmonious way of life stands in direct opposition to Victor's future career as a state official. This opposition recalls the career of another of Stifter's ill-contented *Staatsdiener*, Herr von Risach, who in *Der Nachsommer* (1857) leaves a high government post in order to found a country estate and live from the cultivation of his fields and gardens ["einen Landsitz zu gründen und dort ... der Bewirtschaftung meiner Felder und Gärten zu leben"] (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 4.3: 216–217; Stifter and Frye 441). Here, Stifter's critique of state service not primarily works to underscore the occupations of Victor's father, another holder of an unspecified *Amt*, and of his uncle, a

traveling salesman. Both were victims of the kind of misfortune that Victor is to be spared: for the uncle, unrequited love and lack of family; and for Hippolit, the corruption and social obligation that forced him into an unwanted marriage with the woman who would become Victor's mother (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6: 127–128). And although the reader never learns the cause of death for each of Victor's parents, Hippolit's name hints at a tragedy that Stifter knew personally. In the winter of 1817, when Stifter was twelve, his father, Johann Stifter, a linen merchant, died when his wagon overturned on a road near the Traunsee in Upper Austria, the region whose geography is believed to have inspired the setting of *Der Hagestolz* (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.9: 353; Enzinger, Moriz 69; Matz, 1857 256). In one version of the Phaedra myth, Poseidon startles Hippolytus' horses, which overturn his chariot and drag the youth to his death (Graf and Wirbelbauer). There is also another, lesser known figure contained in this name: the third century schismatic and antipope St. Hippolytus, who after censuring two popes for their failure to condemn heresy, split from the Church before achieving martyrdom by being torn apart by horses (Kirsch). Two of Stifter's characters thus bear traces of Stifter's father and an early Christian martyr: the uncle as the traveling salesman, who "martyrs" his own life for the sake of his nephew's inheritance; and Victor's father as the (possible) victim of roadside tragedy, whose accidental "martyrdom" is the precondition for the uncle's salvific efforts to rescue Victor from a childless death and a life of civil service.⁸⁵ Over against these two distinctly "modern" (Matz, 1857 255) lives of misfortune and sacrifice, Stifter sets a pre-modern rural life, which offers the only setting for human fulfillment (Adamy 96).

This gesture against the contingencies and confines of modern life finds an extreme expression in the uncle's imprisonment of Victor on the island. The aim of this confinement is to force Victor to struggle against the bonds of his captivity and free himself from his "treachery dependence" [*süßliche Abhängigkeit*] on his foster mother, Ludmilla. As the uncle tells Victor:

‘Ich mußte dich in die Sonne und in die Luft hervorreißen, sonst wirst du ein weiches Ding, wie dein Vater, und wirst, wie er, so nachhaltlos, daß du das verrätst, was du zu lieben meinst. [...] Wie oft habe ich dich verlangt, daß sie dich senden sollen, ehe sie es taten. Dein Vater hätte dich *mir* geben sollen – aber er hat gemeint, ich sei ein Raubtier, das dich zerrisse; ich hätte dich eher zu einem Adler gemacht, der die Welt in seinen Fängen hält, und sie auch, wenn es sein muß, in den Abgrund wirft.’ (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6, 119–120)

“I had to pull you out into the sun and the air, lest you become a soft thing like your father and, like him, so ineffectual that you betray that which you think you love. [...] How many times I asked them to send you, before they finally did! Your father should have given you to *me* – but he said I was a beast of prey that would rip you apart; I would instead have turned you into an eagle that held the world in its talons, one that, if need be, would have thrown it into the abyss, too.” (Stifter and Bryer 132)

Just as integral as the formation of Victor's "historical consciousness" is the reshaping of his character to become, in the uncle's words, an "eagle" willing to cast the world into the abyss if

⁸⁵ For further evidence that Stifter viewed his own father as a martyr, recall "das Bilde des gemarterten Gilbert" ["the image of the martyr Gilbert"] which Victor passes in the forest on the way to his uncle's island. In Stifter's Bohemia, as in many Catholic regions today, it was not uncommon for relatives to erect shrines [*Marterl*] where a loved one had died in an accident (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe*, 1.9: 353).

necessary. This rhetoric, which anticipates that of Nietzsche's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (Loock 35; Matz, 1857 384; Krökel 107), adds a powerful dimension to the uncle's attempt to interrupt the seemingly irreversible course of history and save Victor from a childless life of minor officialdom. Despite the old man's resignation and use of the conditional ("ich hätte dich eher zu einem Adler gemacht"; "Dich hätte ich geliebt!") (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6, 118), his plan in many ways succeeds, as Victor is forced "to struggle against force and oppression" ["gegen Gewalt und Druck an[zu]kämpfen"] (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6, 120; Stifter and Bryer 133). Victor's successful struggle against his captivity and the resultant development of his physical and intellectual powers – illustrated, for example, by his escape through the underwater portcullis and hard-won freedom to swim in the lake – forms the precondition for what the uncle hopes will follow: a period of two to three years during which Victor should travel before returning to a settled married life. The old man justifies this journey by telling Victor that a man can only achieve self-fulfillment "when all the strengths granted him are set to work and activated – for that is what living and what pleasure are" ["wenn alle Kräfte, die ihm beschieden worden sind, in Arbeit und Tätigkeit gesetzt werden – denn das ist Leben und Genuß."] (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6, 121; Stifter and Bryer 135).

In this conception, Victor will have the space [*Spielraum*] to give free play to all of his vital forces [*Kräfte*] during his travels and upon his return to his anachronistic "Roman" agricultural estate. This transcendent pastoral utopia offers a space beyond the confines of the social and economic order in which Victor can realize his fullest potential as a man. It lies beyond the reach of state bureaucracy, which threatens to turn him into a person of limited perspective [*ein beschränkter Mensch*] like his guardian, a man for whom "the table at which he sits blinds him to the world, the sea, to everything" ["der Tisch, auf dem er schreibt, ... ihm die ganze Welt und das Meer [deckt], und alles zu"] (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6, 126; Stifter and Bryer 140). By escaping the narrow confines of this life Victor is spared the messy contingent world of business and money, in which his father and uncle suffered so much misfortune.

For these reasons, the old man is surprised when Victor, wishing to prove that he is "not self-seeking" [*uneigennützig*] (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6, 131; Stifter and Bryer 146) refuses the title to the estate that his uncle has secured for him. Yet Victor's refusal represents merely a final test of his character, and, so, the text does not let him go unrewarded. After Victor leaves the island and returns home, he learns that his uncle has sent the title ahead of him, which, as Ludmilla urges, he should accept with joy and gratitude. Victor shares the reader's surprise at this "difficult" [*schwer*] and "strange" [*seltsam*] turn of events [*Wendung der Dinge*], but Ludmilla reassures him:

‘Dein Vormund sagt, daß du alles genau so erfüllen sollest, wie es der Oheim begehrt. Du brauchst jetzt gar nicht mehr in dein Amt zu treten, in das er dich hat bringen wollen; denn diese Wendung der Dinge hat niemand vorhersehen können, und es steht dir ein herrliches Leben bevor.’ (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6, 138)

‘Your guardian says you should carry out everything exactly as your uncle wishes. You no longer need now to take up the post he wished to set you up in, for this turn of events couldn't have been foreseen and a wonderful life has opened up in front of you.’ (Stifter and Bryer 154)

Ludmilla's admission that no one could have foreseen this "turn of events" draws the reader's attention to the poetic artifice that enables such an ending. This textual self-awareness reemerges when Victor and Hanna marry after his four-year journey abroad. As the foster siblings stand together at the altar, they do so as "two creatures whose faces were copies of two others who might also once have been glad to stand before the same altar but who through misfortune and their own fault were torn from each other and then rued it for the rest of their lives" ["zwei Wesen, deren Antlitze die Abbilder von zwei anderen waren, die einmal auch gerne vor demselben Altare gestanden wären, aber durch Unglück und Verschuldung auseinander gerissen worden waren, und dann lebenslang bereuten."] (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6, 141; Stifter and Bryer 158). As links in a generational "chain of iconic signs" that copy and refer to each other (Begemann 49), Victor and Hanna have literally become "copies" [*Abbilder*] of the original "images" [*Bilder*], Hippolit and Ludmilla. (This is the reason why Victor never asks his uncle for his father's portrait: having become its copy, he has no more need of it.). Through the literalization of the *Bild*-metaphor, Stifter secularizes the biblical conception of genealogy, whereby God creates Adam in his own image [*Bild*], and Adam's son Seth is said to be in his father's "own image" [*seinem Bild ähnlich*] (Gen 5,3), and transforms it into a "sacralization of the family" (Begemann 50). In this fictional universe, where transcendence has been replaced by the commandment to drink the cup of life dry ["dieses Leben ... bis zum Grunde [auszuschöpfen]"], and all generational memory erodes over time, Victor and Hanna inhabit a dream-like world of "wish fulfillment" (Matz, 1857 260) in which generational "copies" can set right the misfortune and fault of the original "images." In this realm the young couple can, at least superficially, live up to their eschatological names: Victor as the messianic *Christus Victor*, who ransomed Himself to Satan for the redemption of all humanity, and Hanna as the eponymous, once-barren mother of Samuel, the Old Testament judge, prophet and anointer of kings. The apparent victory over death, childlessness and generational rupture that these names imply is suggested even while it is undermined by the following sentences: "When all the celebrations were over, Victor led Hanna in triumph to his estate. Their mother didn't go with them; she said she would see soon enough how everything would turn out" ["Nach Vollendung der Festlichkeiten führte Victor Hanna mit Triumph auf sein Gut. Die Mutter ging nicht mit; sie sagte, sie werde schon noch sehen, wie sich alles fügen werde."] (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6, 141; Stifter and Bryer 158). Through his use of the word *fügen* and its connotations of textual arrangement, Stifter once more draws attention to the poetic construct that allows for such a "triumphal" ending, and casts further doubt on the success of the uncle's plan to interrupt the "empty, homogenous" continuum of history. This doubt is reinforced by the narrator's prediction that Victor and Hanna's life together will be "long, beautiful and rapturous" ["eine lange, schöne, glückselige [Zeit]" (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6, 140; Stifter and Bryer 156), a paradisiacal conception of time just as empty and homogenous as that in Ludmilla's idyll.

In this way, *Der Hagestolz* privileges generational and linguistic instability over artificially produced harmony. The text does this by foregrounding a mix of rupture and continuity best seen in the childless uncle himself. Despite being prematurely erased from generational memory, he is able to bridge the gap in his family's primogenital line and transfer to Victor his rightful inheritance. This transfer is made possible by an act of deliberate "martyrdom:" the assumption of a secularized, quasi-monastic "living death" as a hermit in a disused monastery on a desert island. As ersatz father and stand-in for Hippolit, the unintentional "martyr," the uncle willingly sacrifices a life in the world for the sake of Victor's *Bildung* and ensured generational memory. In an ironic twist, the old man's selflessness overcomes his

paranoid self-regard, which is said to result from a lack of love. In this, his efforts are not in vain, for he earns the love of his nephew, who recognizes him as “a wonderful, excellent man” [“ein herrlicher vortrefflicher Mann”] (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6, 137; Stifter and Bryer 152), and whose eyes fill with tears when he kisses his uncle’s wrinkled hand in farewell (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6, 132; Stifter and Bryer 146). But even this hard-earned closeness cannot cancel the fact that the two men are not father and son; that Victor is not the uncle’s generational copy. For his existence has left none behind [“sein Dasein [hat] kein Bild geprägt”], and he remains the “barren fig tree” from whose seed none of the remaining plants in the garden has sprung (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6, 142; Stifter and Bryer 158–159). With this biblical allusion, Stifter deploys Jesus’ parable on repentance (Luke 13:6–9) to underscore the uncle’s failure to forge a link in the chain of generational memory and his effacement from “deep” time. Stifter embeds this intertextual echo within apocalyptic language borrowed from the Book of Revelation: “and when finally in the ocean of time everything, everything perishes, even the greatest and those things that give most joy, *he* will perish before this moment, because everything in him is already in the throes of swift decline while he still draws breath and while he still lives” [“und wenn in dem Ozean der Tage endlich alles, alles untergeht, selbst das Größte und das Freudigste, so geht er eher unter, weil an im schon alles im Sinken begriffen ist, während er noch atmet, und während er noch lebt.”] (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6, 142; Stifter and Bryer 159). Offering his own exegesis of the gospel parable, Stifter suggests that the only “fruits” of any consequence are not those of repentance, but those in the form of human offspring. As it did with the word *Bild*, Stifter’s text once more highlights the literalness of the biblical text. This literalness culminates in the final image of the uncle “going down” [*untergeht*] or “sinking” [*im Sinken begriffen*] into the sandy “desert” ground upon which he sits. Like dust, sand gestures metonymically to the desert, a realm of oblivion and death that escapes the grasp of language and stands outside and beyond the human. The text’s final image points to both a post-human and “post-geologic” universe in which everything earthly [*alles Irdische*], perhaps even the universe itself, “goes down” in a final moment of devastation and oblivion [*alles, alles untergeht*]. In this way both the uncle and creation itself sink into the otherworldly (and other-word-ly) sands that give figure to their absolute negation.

Grains of sand such as these make up the destructive, uncontrollable half of what Stifter, in the prologue to the first *Studien* volume, called the tiny “kernels” upon which the edifice of eternity rests [“das Körnchen [auf dem] der ganze Bau der Ewigkeit ruht.”]. As such, they bear traces of the violence and erosion inherent in the Gentle Law, whose ideals of order and growth are metaphorized by grains of corn (Gerlach 118). Stifter’s oeuvre can thus be said to negotiate the tension between the non-human, not-orderable and contingent realm of sand on the one side, and the ordered, orderable human realm of corn on the other. The following diagram is meant to illustrate this tension:

Sand: (Dust; Desert)	natural world: geology	contingent	not orderable	wordless zone
Corn: (Crops; Field)	human world: (agri)culture	regular; predictable	ordered, orderable	language; syntactic/symbolic order

It is no accident that by the end of *Der Hagestolz*, Victor becomes a farmer while his uncle sinks into the sands of his “desert” island. For Stifter, the practice of agriculture, specifically the

cultivation of corn, was a metaphor for a mode of writing that protects writing from dissolution and guarantees the difference of signs [“die Schrift vor der Auflösung schützt und die Differenz der Zeichen garantiert”] (Gerlach 122). Over against the legible order of corn, the desert appears already in the novella *Abdias* (1842) as a poetological “allegory of illegibility” (Gerlach 116). In *Der Hagestolz*, the illegibility of sand extends to the metonym dust, which recurs as a disturbing element with no clear differentiation or status as a sign (Vedder 24), and points to the “wordless zone” of non-existence and non-memory.

Just as Stifter’s contemplation of “nature and objects, time and being, living and dwelling uncannily prefigures the direction of Heidegger’s thought” (Weissberg 271), his notion that the desert poses a threat to human memory anticipates Heidegger’s own desert rhetoric in *What is Called Thinking?* (*Was heißt Denken?*), in which the “devastation of Mnemosyne” [*die Verwüstung der Mnemosyne*] “blocks all future growth and prevents all building” [“unterbindet künftiges Wachstum und verwehrt jedes Bauen”]. Like Stifter, Heidegger mobilizes the desert’s ambivalence and potential both to contain contradictory ideas and challenge binary thinking. Just as the uncle’s “desert” island is a site of both memory preserved and memory erased, Heidegger’s desert heralds more than just “devastation.” As an emblem for “the most thought-provoking in our thought-provoking time [...], that we are still not thinking” [“das Bedenklichste in unserer bedenklichen Zeit [...], daß wir noch nicht denken.”] (Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?* 28; Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe* 8, 7), Heidegger’s desert contains the potential to set human beings on the way to “thinking as remembrance” [*Denken als Andenken*] (Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe* 8, 13) Taking his cue from Nietzsche, who warns against the concealment of the growing wasteland, Heidegger sees the recognition and recollection of humanity’s thoughtlessness as a necessary step on the way in, of, and towards thinking (Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe* 8, 31–32). Just as Nietzsche’s desert is where the spirit undergoes three “transformations” (Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* 22), Heidegger’s desert has the potential to transform humanity’s fundamental relationship to Being [*Sein*]. This shift in orientation is achieved in part through an attuned ear for “the working” [*das Wirkende*] in the words of poets [*Dichter*] such as Stifter, whose word points into the depths of the “invisible” [*jenes ganz Unsichtbare*] to which human beings must attune the ground of their Being if they are to dwell on this earth (Heidegger, *Aus der Erfahrung des Denkens, 1910-1976* 197).

Heidegger’s reading of *Eisgeschichte* sheds light on the literalness of *Der Hagestolz*, which can also be said to make “audible” the “unspoken” metaphors that underpin everyday words such as *Bild*, *Gegenbild*, *fügen*, *rücksichtslos*, *vorstellen*, and *verwüstet*. More than merely echo Heidegger’s claim that Stifter enjoyed some deeper insight into the nature of language and being (Geulen 54–55), I read this defamiliarizing gesture as a central element of Stifter’s desert writing. Deploying the desert metonyms dust and sand, *Der Hagestolz* “desiccates” language by using these figures not only to represent or signify, but to point to the mute margins of language and memory. In this way, Stifter’s desert writing recalls Foucault’s notion of “heterotopias,” already familiar to us from our discussion of Meister Eckhart in Chapter One. To review: where utopias “afford consolation” in that there is a “fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold,”

[h]eterotopias are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, ... because they destroy ... that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to ‘hold together’. [...] [H]eterotopias ... desiccate

speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences. (Foucault xviii)

Although few would dispute that many of its sentences contain great lyricism, *Der Hagestolz* “dissolves” the myth of a transcendent pastoral utopia through two acts of “desiccation.” The first, of language, uncovers its constructed nature and the weakness of that construction – what Maurer calls “semantic cracks, ruptures and instabilities.” Through moments of self-conscious reflection – many of them involving the desert, the driest of places – the text arrests the flow of narration and prompts the reader to pause and listen to both the spoken and unspoken of everyday words.

The second act of desiccation entails the literal “drying out” of the uncle, the fruitless fig tree, whose “leaves” [*Blätter*] grow fewer and fewer until only “the dried up branches stretch upwards” [*die dürren Äste emporragen*] (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6, 122; Stifter and Bryer 158). On a text internal level, this image of sterility and gradual death is belied in part by the uncle’s securement and transfer of Victor’s inheritance (Victor is, after all, the generational “fruit” of his brother Hippolit.). Yet just as significantly, this “barren” image is belied by the lyrical and speculative productivity of the desert contained within, and inscribed upon the pages [*Blätter*] of Stifter’s novella. In this poetological sense, the text can be thought of as a tree, which grows in both the desert *and* the garden.⁸⁶ Although it bears no “fruit” and will one day be removed [*weggetan*], its few remaining “leaves” record and preserve the words and deeds of two men threatened by oblivion. *Der Hagestolz* thus embodies a poetic model of non-paternal authorship that I call the “poetics of fosterage.” Through indirect transfer [*die Gabe auf Unwegen*] (Vedder 31), this poetics evades the hazards of inheritance and rescues two men – one childless, the other fatherless – from sterility.

In privileging the self-sacrifice that artistic production often entails, the poetics of fosterage recalls the parallels between the uncle’s childlessness and Stifter’s own (Federmair 36–40).⁸⁷ More than with any other character, the sympathies of the narrator lie with the one for whom a traditional transfer of genealogy and inheritance is no longer possible (Wessel 183). For Stifter, the tutor and school reformer, the preferred model is one of pedagogy and patronage, for the uncle is as much teacher as curator. The lessons he gives Victor involve recounting family history, setting physical obstacles, and devising mental puzzles. By passing these tests and pushing back against his imprisonment, Victor can undo the “softening” (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6, 119–120) effects of Ludmilla’s own fosterage. As Victor becomes strong enough for, and worthy of his birthright, the law of primogeniture is reinstated through pedagogy; dynastic stability is ensured through mental, physical and historical *Bildung*. In this, the uncle’s project, we hear yet another echo of Samuel, who anointed and instructed Saul and David, the first two Israelite kings (1 Sam 10; 16). This Biblical subtext underscores the novella’s preoccupation with rupture and continuity, for David broke Saul’s dynastic line after Saul had lost God’s favor (1 Sam 16).

Despite these resonances of dynastic instability, *Der Hagestolz* embodies the fruitful possibilities of a poetics of fosterage, even as it draws attention to its instability and contingency.

⁸⁶ As I have shown in Chapter One, the desert and the garden form two sides of the same biblical figure.

⁸⁷ Stifter and his wife, Anna Mohaupt, never succeeded in having any surviving children. There is some evidence that their only biological child had hydrocephalus and died in infancy. Their experience with Mohaupt’s niece, Juliane, whom they adopted in 1847, was similarly unhappy, as her drowned body was found in 1857, four weeks after she had run away from home.

The novella underscores, for instance, that the uncle's martyrdom for a bourgeois utopia of Roman *Landwirtschaft* is possible only in fiction, and even here only tenuously. Readers are left with the feeling that there is no chance of interrupting history, no salvation in going backwards. What we get instead is a call to "cultivate the desert," as it were: to keep the sands at bay while we, like the uncle, add humus to the soil to make flowers and fruit trees grow (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6, 128–129). Ideally, this act of cultivation entails the "sowing" of children, the "sweet fruits" [*süße Früchte*] who spring from our "seeds" [*Körnern*] (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1.6, 142) and slow the inevitable erosion of our generational memory. Yet even these "sweet fruits" cannot change the fact that, as Borges wrote, "Nothing is built upon rock: for all is built upon sand: but let each man build as if sand were rock" (Borges 111; Welland 234).

In its unearthing, and valorization of the shifting, impermanent foundations of human existence, *Der Hagestolz* celebrates the work of a "sinking" man. In a letter to his friend and publisher Gustav Heckenast, Stifter wrote that he wanted the uncle to be "a grandiose, darkly splendid character" ["ein grandios düster prächtiger Charakter"] (Stifter, *Sämtliche Werke*. 17 122). This paradoxical description perfectly encapsulates the "darkly splendid" mix of beauty and gloom, success and failure, continuity and rupture inherent in Stifter's "poetics of fosterage," whose "gray zone" (Ingen 72) makes Stifter's work so fascinating and disturbing, and such a rich site for interrogations into the nature of memory, language, history and time.

The desert is only one of the more apparent metaphors with which Stifter engaged with the *grandios düstere Pracht* of his own life and poetic office. By necessity, this meant acknowledging the limits of both. As he wrote in the final version of *Mein Leben* (1867) published one year before his death: "Every grain of sand is a thing whose being we cannot fathom" ["Jedes Sandkorn ist ein Ding, dessen Wesenheit wir nicht ergründen können"] (Gerlach 121). Despite this essential unknowability of sand, *Der Hagestolz* attempts to probe its mysteries. It also suggests that despite our best efforts to make the wasteland bloom, sand will conquer all. "The wasteland grows," Nietzsche pronounces. "We will all sink into oblivion and nothingness," *Der Hagestolz* seems to say. In the meantime, however, we keep the desert and the "mute work of erosion" (Schneider 265) at bay, keenly aware that the "sands" of oblivion will eventually cover ourselves, and the everyday things in which we preserve our memories. For Stifter, the most important of these *Dinge* was his work itself. That we still read the poetic fruit of this "fruitless fig tree" a century and a half after his death proves that he far from barren, far from forgotten. There are still many of us who make the time and effort to blow the sand from his dusty books.

Chapter 4

Transvaluations and Embodiments of the Desert in Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra*

In nineteenth century German literature, Stifter's desert is matched in speculative potential by that of only Nietzsche, for whom *die Wüste* is a privileged figure of cultural critique and moral "transvaluation" [*die Umwertung aller Werte*].⁸⁸ Given Nietzsche's admiration for Stifter, and especially *Der Nachsommer*,⁸⁹ it is perhaps no coincidence that many of Nietzsche's writings display a fascination for, and engagement with a figure that so enthralled his Bohemian precursor. It is noteworthy that *Also sprach Zarathustra* (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*) (1883-1885), a text in which the desert assumes such great importance, contains numerous passages that recall the uncle's exhortations to Victor in *Der Hagestolz* (Loock 35; Matz, 1857 384; Krökel 107).⁹⁰ Rather than suggest or make claims of "influence," I read these intertextual echoes instead as evidence that both authors "drank" of the same desert wellspring, or "breathed" the same desert air.⁹¹ By this I mean that both mobilized the at once arid and fruitful ambiguity of the desert in order to speculate on the nature of memory, forgetting, and language.

In making this claim, I do not disregard the substantial differences between Stifter und Nietzsche's respective desert figures. As I show in the previous chapter, Stifter's desert often stands in for a zone of radical otherness, generational oblivion, and human extinction. While Nietzsche's desert at times recalls a similar realm, it more often expresses a space of critique and transformation that is humanly, and necessarily attainable. While this fundamental difference must not be ignored, it does not obscure the kinship between the ways in which Stifter and Nietzsche use the desert to reflect upon the ground, possibilities, and limits of language and memory. As I have shown, the grains of sand and motes of dust that fill *Der Hagestolz* are material reminders of an ever-present, menacing realm of oblivion and non-existence; they are, in a certain sense, the physical and linguistic signs of a nonhuman region which Stifter attempts to "cultivate" with the plow-like movements of his quill. While this speculative region remains largely suggested and only indirectly addressed in Stifter's writings, Nietzsche articulates more explicitly a desert in which writing, memory, and forgetting are all at stake.

One text that mobilizes these three interwoven elements is the poem *Unter Töchtern der Wüste* (*Among Daughters of the Desert*), which appears in the fourth and final part of *Zarathustra*. There, Nietzsche stages the desert as the *locus par excellence* of poetic invention and an active forgetfulness that forgets forgetting itself. As Friedrich Kittler writes, this active

⁸⁸ See, for example, *Nachgelassene Fragmente* 1886, 7 (1): "Der ganze Idealismus der bisherigen Menschheit ist im Begriff, in Nihilismus umzuschlagen — in den Glauben an die absolute Werthlosigkeit das heißt Sinnlosigkeit... Die Vernichtung der Ideale, die neue Öde, die neuen Künste, um es auszuhalten, wir Amphibien." ["The entire idealism of mankind hitherto is on the point of changing suddenly into nihilism — into the belief in absolute worthlessness, i.e. *meaninglessness*. The destruction of ideals, the new desert; new arts by means of which we can endure it, we amphibians."], *Will to Power* 617, "Recapitulation" (1883-1885), 331.

⁸⁹ (Matz, 1857 375) Besides calling *Der Nachsommer* of the few works of German prose worthy of being read and re-read ["das es verdiente, wieder und wieder gelesen zu werden"], Nietzsche praised the novel as the only German book after Goethe that had any "magic" [*Zauber*] for him.

⁹⁰ One notable example is the uncle's claim that he would have made Victor into an "eagle that held the world in its talons, one that, if need be, would have thrown it into the abyss, too" (Stifter, *Werke und Briefe* 1,6: 119–120; Stifter and Bryer 132).

⁹¹ As Lindemann (123) writes, 18th and 19th century European cultural "air" was redolent of "the Orient," which was represented in countless literary and pictorial depictions of the North African and Middle Eastern deserts. At this time it is possible to speak without exaggeration of a genuine "desert craze" in Western Europe.

forgetfulness is able to bring about the “flight of ideas” [*die Gedankenflucht*], a non-hermeneutic⁹² state of mind and body characterized by “the incessant and thought-fleeing innocence of speech.” Although often a term of pathology (Schacht 77–78), *Gedankenflucht* is understood by Kittler to be a goal of Nietzsche’s late work, and not only, or even primarily, a symptom of Nietzsche’s “madness” (Kittler, *Aufschreibesysteme 1800-1900* 258; Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* 205).⁹³ This understanding of *Gedankenflucht* is informed by Nietzsche’s “philosophy of corporality” [*Philosophie der Leiblichkeit*]. This posited the methodological primacy of the body vis-à-vis the intellect, and viewed the body as a more reliable instrument of knowledge than the mind (W. Dietrich 62–64).⁹⁴

In his emphasis on the body’s importance for Nietzsche, Kittler offers a productive starting point from which to understand Nietzsche’s phenomenology of the desert as articulated in *Unter Töchtern der Wüste* and other texts. Kittler is right to point out, for example, that in *Unter Töchtern der Wüste* the desert poetologically gives figure to “the conditions that distinguish all signifiers,” the blank page or “background that cannot be stored by any mechanism” (Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* 192). But Kittler does not use this insight to examine the ways in which Nietzsche’s desert invites the reader to enter into this non-hermeneutic “background space” and experience there a “flight of ideas.”

In this chapter, I explore this “invitation” to embody the desert and to discover what Nietzsche called the “south” within (W. Dietrich 69).⁹⁵ In doing this, I explore the ways in which Nietzsche’s desert always already involves a productive tension between memory and forgetting,

⁹² Here, I mean that in this Nietzsche was not concerned with the production of meaning or interpretation. Rather, his aim was the production of a certain kind of experience.

⁹³ “Die Wüste des Zufalls ist ‘ohne Zukunft, ohne Erinnerungen’. Mögen fixe Ideen immer wieder einmal Europäerinbrust sein, um 1900 befällt und begründet den Schreibakt ein anderes, das entgegengesetzte Symptom: die Gedankenflucht. Löwe oder Brüllaffe geworden, darf endlich auch der Philosoph teilhaben am Vorrecht der Tiere - einer aktiven Vergeßlichkeit, die nicht bloß dies und das, sondern Vergessen selber vergißt. Mnemotechnik, schon weil sie Technik und nicht wie Erinnerung eingeborenes Vermögen heißt, gibt es ja nur als Gehalt zur unaufhörlichen und gedankenflüchtigen Unschuld des Redens.

Der dithyrambische Gedankenfluchtwunsch fort aus Europa in die Wüste, um unter ihren Töchtern den Kopf zu verlieren, bleibt nicht ohne Erfüllung. In einer anderen Wüste, der Irren-Heil- und Pflege-Anstalt Jena beweist es der Exprofessor auch vor Zuständigen. Krankengeschichtsschreibenden Psychiatern ‘fällt’ bei Nietzsches Reden ‘auf’, was ihnen um 1900 immer auf- oder einfällt: ‘Ideenflucht’.

[“In the desert of chance there is neither future nor memory. Fixed ideas might once more excite the European’s ardor, but circa 1900 an opposite symptom grounds the act of writing: the flight of ideas. Having become a lion or howling monkey, the philosopher can finally partake of the privilege of animals - an active forgetfulness, which does not merely forget this or that, but forgets forgetting itself. Mnemonic technique, simply by being called technique rather than being, like memory, an inborn faculty, exists only as a resistance to the incessant and thought-fleeing innocence of speech.

The dithyrambic, flight-of-ideas wish to be out of Europe and in the desert, to lose one’s head among its daughters, was not unfulfilled. In another desert, the institute for the cure and care of the insane in Jena, the ex-professor demonstrated this fulfillment in front of experts. What ‘came to’ the psychiatrists writing the case report and listening to Nietzsche’s speech was what always occurred to them circa 1900: ‘flight of ideas.’”]

⁹⁴ See also Nietzsche *Also sprach Zarathustra* I, “Von den Verächtern des Leibes:” “Es ist mehr Vernunft in deinem Leibe, als in deiner besten Weisheit.”

⁹⁵ *KGA* VII, 41 [6], 41 [7]. “[D]en Süden in sich wieder entdecken und einen hellen glänzenden geheimnißvollen Himmel des Südens über sich aufspannen; die südliche Gesundheit und verborgene Mächtigkeit der Seele sich wieder erobern; Schritt vor Schritt umfänglicher werden, übernationaler, europäischer, übereuropäischer, morgenländischer, endlich griechischer — denn das Griechische war die erste große Bindung und Synthesis alles Morgenländischen —: und eben damit der Anfang der europäischen Seele, die Entdeckung unserer „neuen Welt“: — wer unter solchen Imperativen lebt, wer weiß, was dem eines Tages begegnen kann?”

and as such marks both a continuation and break from biblical and monastic wilderness discourses. The concept of productive tension also extends to the relationship between what Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht calls a text's "meaning effects" and "presence effects" (Gumbrecht 107; 18), both of which are at work in Nietzsche's desert writing. This means that Nietzsche's desert writing simultaneously opens up hermeneutic and non-hermeneutic spaces. As I will show, the desert's inherent ambiguity and established tradition as a site of phenomenological experience make it an ideal figure for Nietzsche to articulate a distinct critique of language, metaphysics, and morality.

I: The Godless, Yet Fruitful Desert of Memory and Forgetting

As one of the most important and best-known desert texts by Nietzsche, *Unter Töchtern der Wüste* offers a good entry point into this discussion. This song is recited by the character of the wanderer who is also Zarathustra's shadow. Any understanding of how the desert works in this song requires a look at this ambiguous figure who embodies both the dangers and promises of Nietzsche's desert.

The wanderer-shadow holds a place of dubious distinction among the so-called "superior humans" [*höhere Menschen*] who gather at Zarathustra's cave and serve as ironic foils for the prophet (Brusotti 75). This stems from his privileged status as "free spirit and wanderer," and as the embodiment of the "good European" who, having overcome his nationalism, now casts a critical gaze on Europe from the desert beyond its borders (Brusotti 77–78). As I will discuss later on, the figure of the "free spirit" [*der Freigeist*] is just as inseparable from Nietzsche's desert as it is from the desert discourses of medieval Christian mystics such as Eckhart and Suso. One sees this not only in other parts of *Zarathustra*, but in Nietzsche's letters and unpublished poems. But before I turn to these texts, I would like to examine how the wanderer-shadow embodies Nietzsche's desert both literally and figurally, and how this figure works to produce effects of both meaning and presence.

The first thing to consider is the wanderer-shadow's professed self-identification with the desert. This is so strong that even before he begins his after-dinner "dessert song" [*Nachtslied*],⁹⁶ he makes clear not only that his origins lie in the desert, but that he is also its literal and figural embodiment. He does this by presenting himself as a kind of secularized Ahasverus, the eternal Wandering Jew [*der ewige Jude*], "immer unterwegs, aber ohne Ziel, auch ohne Heim: also daß mir wahrlich wenig zum Ewigen Juden fehlt, es sei denn, daß ich nicht ewig und auch nicht Jude bin" ["always under way, but without a goal, also without a home: such that I am really not far from being the eternal Wandering Jew, except that I am not eternal, nor am I a Jew."] (Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* 221; Nietzsche and Parkes 238). After evoking this archetypal exile, who in Christian legend was cursed to wander the desert of the world after mocking Christ on the road to Calvary, the wanderer-shadow makes clear his at once ubiquitous presence and dematerialized absence through the analogy of dust, one of several desert metonyms familiar to us by now: "'Auf jeder Oberfläche saß ich schon, gleich müdem Staube schlief ich ein auf Spiegeln und Fensterscheiben. [...] 'Wo ist – *mein* Heim?' Darnach frage und suche und suchte ich, das fand ich nicht. O ewiges Überall, o ewiges Nirgendwo, o ewiges – Umsonst!'" ["On every surface I have already sat, and like weary dust I have gone to sleep on mirrors and window-panes. [...] 'Where is – *my* home?' That is what I ask and search and have searched for, and have not found. O eternal everywhere, oh eternal nowhere, oh eternal

⁹⁶ It is very possible that Nietzsche is punning here on the English words "desert" and "dessert."

– in vain.”] (Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* 221; Nietzsche and Parkes 238). Said to cover everything, yet dwelling nowhere, the wanderer-shadow has the worldly presence of dust, that “humble” substance (Walser and Greven 321) which marks the border between being and nothingness (Santner 99). Reading this dust as a metonym for the desert, a space of similar liminality, we can advance the claim that the wanderer-shadow is a literal and material embodiment of the “supranational” [*übernational*] desert that lies beyond Europe’s borders (Brusotti 77). In this desert, Nietzsche saw the possibility for a morality beyond good and evil to emerge, a morality that fears no prohibition (Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* 222; Nietzsche and Parkes 238),⁹⁷ unlearns “the belief in words and values and great names,” and affirms the motto of “the invincible order of the Assassins, the order of free spirits *par excellence*,” namely that “[n]ichts ist wahr, alles ist erlaubt” [“nothing is true, everything is permitted”] (Nietzsche and Diethe 111; Nietzsche and Parkes 239).⁹⁸ Indeed, the desert embodied here by the wanderer-shadow is the same inner wasteland that Nietzsche praises in *Daybreak (Morgenröte) On the Genealogy of Morality (Zur Genealogie der Moral)* (Lindemann 164), and *The Will to Power (Die Wille zur Macht)* (Nietzsche, Kaufmann, and Hollingdale 331).⁹⁹ The desert represents a solitude that is “[h]ungernd, gewaltthätig, einsam, [und] gottlos” [“ravenous, violent, solitary, [and] Godless”], where the “lion-will” [*der Löwen-Wille*] wants itself and nothing else (Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* 85; Nietzsche and Parkes 89; Lindemann 167).¹⁰⁰ It is a space of vast, speculative potential. For this reason, the wanderer-shadow warns his audience against hiding the wasteland’s growth within by taking refuge in moral oases, islands of belief in the desert of godlessness and nihilism (C. A. Miller 173): “denn wo Oasen sind, da sind auch Götzenbilder” [“for where there are oases, there are also images of idols”] (Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* 85; Nietzsche and Parkes 89).

In more than just a characteristic twist of irony, Nietzsche makes such an idolatrous oasis the setting of the wanderer-shadow’s song, which he is said to have composed “unter Töchtern der Wüste” [“among daughters of the desert”], “am fernsten vom wolkgigen feuchten schwermütigen Alt-Europa” [“the farthest away from damp and cloudy heavy-hearted old Europe”] (Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* 247; Nietzsche and Parkes 266). In the role of “idols” are the eponymous “Oriental maidens” [*Morgenland-Mädchen*] whom he loved there, just as he loved the clear heaven “über dem keine Wolken und keine Gedanken hängen” [“over which no clouds and no thoughts hover”] (Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* 247–248; Nietzsche and Parkes 267). The significance of the song, not to mention its humor, lies in its ironic deployment of the hackneyed tropes of Orientalist poetry in order to make vividly literal and materially present Nietzsche’s desert figure (Günzel 231; Lindemann 159–161).¹⁰¹ This gesture of literalization illustrates the fraught nature of Nietzsche’s own epistemological critique,

⁹⁷ “[W]enn irgend etwas an mir Tugend ist, so ist es, daß ich vor keinem Verbote Furcht hatte.”

⁹⁸ eKGWB/GM-III-24 — Zur Genealogie der Moral: § III — 24. Erste Veröff. 16/11/1887.

⁹⁹ eKGWB/NF-1886,7[54] — Nachgelassene Fragmente Ende 1886 — Frühjahr 1887: “Der ganze Idealismus der bisherigen Menschheit ist im Begriff, in Nihilismus umzuschlagen — in den Glauben an die absolute *Werthlosigkeit* das heißt *Sinnlosigkeit*... Die Vernichtung der Ideale, *die neue Ode*, die neuen Künste, um es auszuhalten, wir Amphibien.” [Paragraph 617: “The entire idealism of mankind hitherto is on the point of changing suddenly into nihilism — into the belief in absolute *worthlessness*, i.e. *meaninglessness* ... The destruction of ideals, *the new desert*; new arts by means of which we can endure it, we amphibians.”]

¹⁰⁰ eKGWB/Za-II-Weisen — Also sprach Zarathustra II: § Von den berühmten Weisen. Erste Veröff. 31/12/1883. “Hungernd, gewaltthätig, einsam, gottlos: so will sich selber der *Löwen-Wille*.”

¹⁰¹ Despite his lack of first-hand desert experience - Nietzsche only ever traveled as far south as Sicily, never undertaking a planned journey to Tunisia -, Nietzsche developed an Orientalist aesthetic program that praised the North African or “moorish” desert for its “health,” “sensibility,” and “cheerful” affirmation of life and fate.

since it both upholds the desert's privilege as a metaphor while simultaneously highlighting its fundamental "untruth."¹⁰² Moreover, by locating Nietzsche's desert within the long tradition of desert writing, we notice that despite its apparent status as just another "metaphor," it is anything but. In fact, it is a highly productive trope capable of producing a non-hermeneutic experience.

This does not necessarily mean that the wanderer-shadow is a paragon of an experiential "flight of ideas" or a new morality. On the contrary, Nietzsche imbues the wanderer-shadow with abundant self-irony and presents him as a negative exemplum. As he says in strophe two, the wanderer-shadow finds himself in the precarious intermediate state of being "[d]er Wüste nahe, und bereits / So ferne wieder der Wüste, / Auch in nichts noch verwüestet" ["near the desert and yet / Again so far from the desert, / In nothingness deserted]" (Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* 248; Nietzsche and Parkes 267). His wit is especially keen when, likening the oasis to "[d]as wohlriechendste aller Mäulchen" ["[t]he sweetest smelling of all little mouths"], he makes a "learned allusion" [*gelehrte Anspielung*] to the biblical story of Jonah, who also took refuge in "as delightful an oasis-belly" ["Ein so lieblicher Oasis-Bauch"] (Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* 248–249; Nietzsche and Parkes 268).¹⁰³ As though realizing his own moral weakness for such an allusion, he is quick to note its dubious nature ["was ich aber in Zweifel ziehe"].¹⁰⁴ Indeed, the wanderer-shadow presents himself as an inveterate "doubter" who journeys from a Europe "zweifelsüchtiger ... als alle / Altlichen Eheweibchen" ["more doubt-ridden than all elderly housewives"] in order to tackle his doubts head on (C. A. Miller 171).¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless, he appears to have succeeded only part way in this endeavor. For as a "moral lion" [*moralischer Löwe*] who "roars morally" [*moralisch brüll[t]*] (Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* 251), he has undergone only the second of the three transformations of the spirit described by Zarathustra in the chapter entitled "On the Three Transformations" ("Von den drei Verwandlungen"). In the first transformation, the spirit becomes a camel that burdens itself with all that is heavy so as to "become well pleased with [its] strength" [*seiner Stärke froh*] and press on "well laden" [*gut beladen*] into its own inner desert (Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* 22). This "loneliest desert" [*einsamst[e] Wüste*] is the site of the second transformation, where "the spirit ... becomes a lion," "seize[s] freedom for itself" and "become[s] lord in its own desert" (Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* 22).¹⁰⁵ There the spirit-as-lion slays "the mightiest of dragons" [*der mächtigste aller Drachen*] that of 'Thou-shalt' [*Du-sollst*], whose scales glisten with "values thousands of years old" [*t]ausendjährige Werte*]. In this way, the fearsome predator stakes claim to the Will's right to forge new values, in turn winning the necessary freedom to achieve the final transformation, that from lion to child. The child completes the act of world-creation through its "innocence" [*Unschuld*] and "forgetting" [*Vergessen*], its "beginning anew" [*Neubeginnen*] and

¹⁰² *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinne*. Aus dem Nachlaß:

<http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/WL-Titel>

¹⁰³ "Von dieser kleinsten Oasis -: / - sie sperrte gerade gähnend / Ihr liebliches Maul auf, / Das wohlriechendste aller Mäulchen: / Da fiel ich hinein, / Hinab, hindurch – unter euch, / Ihr allerliebsten Freundinnen! Sela. / Heil, Heil jenem Walfische, / Wenn er also es seinem Gaste / Wohl sein ließ! – ihr versteht / Meine gelehrte Anspielung? / Heil seinem Bauche, / Wenn er also / Ein so lieblicher Oasis-Bauch war / Gleich diesem: was ich aber in Zweifel ziehe, / dafür komme ich aus Europa, / Das zweifelsüchtiger ist als alle / Altlichen Eheweibchen. / Möge Gott es bessern! / Amen!"

¹⁰⁴ As Miller writes, "The implication is that as a 'doubter' he lacks that belief in self which is, for Nietzsche-Zarathustra, the *conditio sine qua non* of authentic discourse (Wer sich selber nicht glaubt, lügt immer) (*KGW*, VI:1, 154)."

¹⁰⁵ "Alles dies Schwerste nimmt der tragsame Geist auf sich: dem Kamele gleich, das beladen in die Wüste eilt, also eilt er in seine Wüste. Aber in der einsamsten Wüste geschieht die zweite Verwandlung: zum Löwen wird hier der Geist, Freiheit will er sich erbeuten und Herr in seiner eignen Wüste."

“sacred Yea-saying” [*heiliges Ja-sagen*]. As a “play” [*Spiel*], a “self-propelling wheel” [*aus sich rollendes Rad*], and a “first movement” [*erste Bewegung*], the spirit-as-child “wills its own will” [*seinen Willen will nun der Geist*], and as a result, “the one who had lost the world attains its own world” [*seine Welt gewinnt sich der Weltverlorene*].

Seen within Zarathustra’s own scheme, the wanderer-shadow is thus caught between two states of transformation. Having entered his own inner, or “true” (Lindemann 167)¹⁰⁶ desert, which ironically, albeit *necessarily* takes the form of a literal desert, he has undergone the first two transformations. But as a lion who remains in thrall of Christian morality and the idol-like (Orientalist) maidens, Dudu and Suleika, the wanderer-shadow can offer only “virtue-howling” [*Tugend-Geheul*] in lieu of “something strengthening, heart-strengthening” [*Etwas Stärkendes, Herz-Stärkendes*] (Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* 251).¹⁰⁷ This moral howling, he contends, is all he can muster as a European, and he ends his song with a mockery of Luther’s pronouncement before the Diet of Worms: “Und da stehe ich schon, / Als Europäer, / Ich kann nicht anders, Gott helfe mir! / Amen!” [“And here I stand now, / As a European, / I can do no other, so help me God! / Amen!”] (Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* 252).

The wanderer-shadow’s “memory song”¹⁰⁸ thus functions principally as a parodic negative exemplum (Lindemann 171; C. A. Miller 175).¹⁰⁹ While its singer may have entered his own “true” desert, “the imaginary place on the edge of the European map from which critique must begin” (Günzel 85), he has not matched this desert’s growth by overcoming his Christian morality. His final cry of “woe” is a warning to the other “superior humans” against failing to cultivate their own inner desert (Lindemann 171), the site of inner solitude that forms a transitional stage on the free-spirit’s way to himself (Skowron 401). Only here can the third transformation from lion to child can take place and the “last human” [*der letzte Mensch*] overcome. Even the five-line coda¹¹⁰ found in *Dionysos Dithyrambs*, with its emphasis on the ravenous desert that “swallows and stuffs” [*schlingt und würgt*], can be read to support this claim: “Vergiss nicht, Mensch, den Wollust ausgelobt: / du – bist der Stein, die Wüste, bist der Tod...” [“Remember, man burned desolate by lust: / You – are the stone, the desert, you are death...”] (C. A. Miller 161). These lines remind both the reader and the “superior humans” alike that, like the stone, they must “grind” themselves down [*Stein knirscht an Stein*], allow their inner desert to grow, and thus bring about the death of their own ideals to create a world beyond the old moral framework.

One of the most important aspects of this creative act involves the “vacillating” (Sobchack 73)¹¹¹ interplay between memory and forgetting. That the wanderer-shadow introduces his song as “an old memory,” is only the first indication that Nietzsche’s text places itself within the longstanding textual tradition that localizes memory and oblivion within the

¹⁰⁶ “Die Wüste der Wahrhaftigen ist eine innere Einsamkeit und äußere Unabhängigkeit, die jede idealistische Fata Morgana zurückweist und lieber ‘[h]ungernd, gewalthätig, einsam, gottlos’ ist.”

¹⁰⁷ “Oder sollte vielleicht / Etwas Stärkendes, Herz-Stärkendes / Hier am Platze sein?”

¹⁰⁸ “Es sei denn, – es sei denn –, o vergib eine alte Erinnerung! Vergib mir ein altes Nachtisch-Lied, das ich einst unter Töchtern der Wüste dichtete:–“ (Nietzsche and Pütz 247).

¹⁰⁹ Miller, however, also reads the song as an “elliptical ‘sermon on chastity’ when [it] warns with the evangelical pathos of the New Testament Christ against eros as a ‘growing desert’ masquerading as an oasis.”

¹¹⁰ This has been generally understood as a “rejoinder or antistrophe” written from Zarathustra’s point of view.

¹¹¹ I borrow this term from Sobchack to describe another way in which “the body and language (whether film language or “natural” language) do not simply oppose or reflect each other. Rather, they more radically *in-form* each other in a fundamentally nonhierarchical and reversible relationship that, in certain circumstances, manifests itself as a vacillating, ambivalent, often ambiguously undifferentiated, and thus “unnameable” or “undecidable” experience.”

desert, and allows for their simultaneity. This tradition is incorporated quite explicitly into Nietzsche's larger project of moral transvaluation [*die Umwertung aller Werte*]. Like Meister Eckhart and others who drew from the deep well of biblical wilderness imagery, Nietzsche similarly calls for the cultivation of an inner desert that transcends memory and entails a fruitful moment of oblivion. It is particularly revealing, for example, that while the wanderer-shadow "drinks" the desert's "most beautiful," "paradisaal air," he sits as one "[o]hne Zukunft, ohne Erinnerungen" ["[w]ithout future, without reminiscences"] (Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* 250; Nietzsche and Parkes 269).¹¹² His "quasi-mystical" (Nietzsche and Parkes 290, Note 14) state of fullness and self-oblivion resembles in kind, though not in degree, Zarathustra's own, which he describes in the prologue (Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* 14)¹¹³ and achieves in the chapter "The Drunken Song" ("das trunkene Lied"). There, as in the earlier chapter "At Midday" ("Mittags"), the prophet sinks into the "well of eternity" [*der Brunnen der Ewigkeit*], experiencing a moment of sublime perfection in which his subjective "I" expands and dissolves.¹¹⁴ This moment is marked by "ein Duft und Geruch der Ewigkeit, ein rosenseliges brauner Gold-Wein-Geruch von altem Glücke, – von trunkenem Mitternachts-Sterbeglücke, welches singt: die Welt ist tief, und tiefer als der Tag gedacht!" ["a fragrance and odor of eternity, a rose-blissful brown gold-wine-odor of ancient happiness, – of drunken midnight-dying happiness, which sings: The world is deep, deeper than day had been aware!"] (Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* 261; Nietzsche and Parkes 281). To a similar, albeit lesser degree, the wanderer-shadow also gets a whiff of this "ripe" and "round" Dionysian perfection of eternal return [*die ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen*]. But this olfactory pleasure must fade, since as a "moral lion" he has not done the necessary work to overcome himself and attain the state of childlike freedom subsumed under Nietzsche's concept of creative or "active forgetfulness" [*aktive Vergesslichkeit*] (Kleinschmidt 134).

This concept, which runs like a red thread through much of Nietzsche's work, stands in a relationship of productive tension with the "memory of the will" [*Gedächtnis des Willens*]. Nietzsche discusses both in the second essay of *On the Genealogy of Morality*, which begins with the question of man as the animal that "promises." There he asks, "[e]in Thier heranzüchten, das versprechen darf - ist das nicht gerade jene paradoxe Aufgabe selbst, welche sich die Natur in Hinsicht auf den Menschen gestellt hat? ist es nicht das eigentliche Problem vom Menschen?" ["[t]o breed an animal with the prerogative to promise - is that not precisely the paradoxical task with which nature has set herself with regard to humankind? is it not the real problem of humankind?"] (Nietzsche, *eKGWB GM 2.1*; Nietzsche and Diethel 35). Nietzsche goes on to call forgetfulness "keine blosse vis inertiae, [...] sie ist vielmehr ein aktives, im strengsten Sinne positives Hemmungsvermögen" ["not just a *vis inertiae*, [...] but rather an active ability to suppress, positive in the strongest sense of the word"]. This positive ability to suppress creates a "*tabula rasa* of consciousness" [*tabula rasa des Bewusstseins*] needed "to make room for something new" ["damit wieder Platz wird für Neues"]. Without this "doorkeeper" [*Thürwächterin*] and "guardian of mental order" [*Aufrechterhalterin der seelischen Ordnung*], there could be "no happiness, cheerfulness, hope, pride, [or] immediacy" ["kein

¹¹² "Diese schönste Luft trinkend, / Mit Nüstern geschwellt gleich Bechern, / Ohne Zukunft, ohne Erinnerungen, / So sitze ich hier, ihr / Allerliebsten Freundinnen."

¹¹³ "Ich liebe den, dessen Seele übervoll ist, so daß er sich selber vergißt, und alle Dinge in ihm sind: so werden alle Dinge sein Untergang."

¹¹⁴ Parkes hears an echo of this passage in one of Nietzsche's unpublished fragments: "Ich bin zu voll: so vergesse ich mich selber, und alle Dinge sind in mir, und nichts giebt es mehr als alle Dinge. Wo bin ich hin?" eKGWB/NF-1882, 10:5[1] 238 – Nachgelassene Fragmente November 1882 – Februar 1883.

Glück, keine Heiterkeit, keine Hoffnung, keinen Stolz, keine Gegenwart”]. The necessary *Hemmungsapparat* of forgetting has its corresponding counter weight in the memory of the will. This is “ein aktives Nicht-wieder-los-werden-wollen, ein Fort- und Fortwollen des ein Mal Gewollten [...]”: so dass zwischen das ursprüngliche ‘ich will’ ‘ich werde thun’ und die eigentliche Entladung des Willens, seinen Akt, unbedenklich eine Welt von neuen fremden Dingen, Umständen, selbst Willensakten dazwischengelegt werden darf, ohne dass diese lange Kette des Willens springt” [“an active *desire* not to let go, a desire to keep on desiring what has been, on some occasion, desired, [...] so that a world of strange new things, circumstances and even acts of will may be placed quite safely in between the original ‘I will’, ‘I shall do’ and the actual discharge of the will, its *act*, without breaking the long chain of the will”] (Nietzsche and Diethel 36; Begemann 49; White 337). In this respect, Nietzsche’s project sought to pave the way for such a “sovereign,” “supra-ethical” master of himself and “the free will” - an individual who like the ancient Greeks could strike a “precarious balance between form and total chaos” - that is, between memory and forgetting - “by keeping awareness of both possibilities consistently alive to consciousness” (White 338). For Nietzsche, only the Greeks recognized the mutual independence of form and chaos, the necessity of illusions that enabled life and action in the face of an otherwise absurd and “nausea-inducing” existence (White 339). The Greeks were thus exemplary in their embodiment of a “*growth of consciousness in the will itself*” and a metaphorical (self-) consciousness that saw phenomena as “images that have no ‘meanings’ outside themselves” (White 345).

Nietzsche’s most developed figuration of a similar “supra-ethical” individual is Zarathustra. In the chapter called “The Convalescent” (“Der Genesende”), for example, we find the prophet awakening from a feverish seven-day sleep, during which he resembled a “dead man.” After his animals ask him what new knowledge [*Erkenntnis*] he gained during this convalescent slumber, he responds by praising their “babble” [*Schwätzen*], for as he says, “Wo geschwätzt wird, da liegt mir schon die Welt wie ein Garten” [“where there is babbling, the world indeed lies before me like a garden”] (Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* 177; Nietzsche and Parkes 175). He then goes on to praise, not without irony, the “rainbows” of words and tones:

“Wie lieblich ist es, dass Worte und Töne da sind: sind nicht Worte und Töne Regenbogen und Schein-Brücken zwischen Ewig-Geschiedenem? Zu jeder Seele gehört eine andre Welt; für jede Seele ist jede andre Seele eine Hinterwelt. Zwischen dem Ähnlichsten gerade lügt der Schein am schönsten; denn die kleinste Kluft ist am schwersten zu überbrücken. Für mich — wie gäbe es ein Ausser-mir? Es giebt kein Aussen! Aber das vergessen wir bei allen Tönen; wie lieblich ist es, dass wir vergessen! Sind nicht den Dingen Namen und Töne geschenkt, dass der Mensch sich an den Dingen erquicke? Es ist eine schöne Narrethei, das Sprechen: damit tanzt der Mensch über alle Dinge. Wie lieblich ist alles Reden und alle Lüge der Töne! Mit Tönen tanzt unsre Liebe auf bunten *Regenbögen*.” (Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* 177–178)

“How lovely it is that there are words and sounds; aren’t words and sounds rainbows and illusory bridges between things eternally separated? To each soul belongs another world; for each soul every other soul is a hinter-world. Illusion tells its loveliest lies about the things that are most similar, because the tiniest gap is hardest to bridge. For me – how would there be something outside me? There is no outside! But we forget this with all

sounds; how lovely it is that we forget! Have names and sounds not been bestowed on things so that human beings can invigorate themselves on things? It is a beautiful folly, speaking: with it humans dance over all things. How lovely is all talking and all lying of sounds! With sounds our love dances on colorful rainbows.” (Nietzsche and Parkes 175)

One of the most striking aspects of this particularly lyrical passage is Zarathustra’s ambiguous rejection of the traditional subject/object divide. As he explains, it is only through our speech and passion for names and words that human beings forget the nonexistence of anything “outside” of us. In other words, the apparent “rainbow-like” beauty of words causes us to forget that we occupy the same ontological realm of *Machtquanta* as everything else in the world, “subject” and “object” alike (Kleinschmidt 134).¹¹⁵ While there is no shortage of irony in his praise of the “lovely” [*lieblich*] fact “that we forget” our fundamental relationship with objects and with ourselves, Zarathustra’s statement also expresses something sincere. On the one hand, it is a reformulation of Nietzsche’s epistemological critique of language, which holds that humans unconsciously “forget” the originary “lies” at the root of all metaphor and mistake them instead for the things-in-themselves (Kleinschmidt 140).¹¹⁶ But the prophet’s words are in equal parts praise for the creative capacity of human beings to forget and open up new possibilities for being in the world (Weinrich 130). This perpetual tension exemplifies Nietzsche’s attempt to bring opposites into coincidence in the figure of Zarathustra (Kleinschmidt 137),¹¹⁷ and it enacts Nietzsche’s central claim that language is inherently duplicitous and unstable. Nowhere is this more visible than in the figure of the desert, which like the Greeks, betrays an awareness of its own impermanence, instability and “fictive foundations.” And yet the desert is also central to Nietzsche’s project as the privileged locus in which the memory of the will and active forgetfulness vacillate in fruitful tension. In this sense, Nietzsche’s desert figure works not unlike a Zen koan. It frustrates binary thinking and shifts the focus away from the level of meaning towards a non-hermeneutic, phenomenological state of body/mind that cannot be experienced through words, only through affect. This is not to say that words are unimportant, as they are the generators of such an experience. But they ultimately must be overcome in order to experience the other side of the coin, as it were. It is noteworthy, for example, that when Zarathustra awakens to hear the “chatter” of his animals, he describes the world as a “garden” lying before him, that is, as an obverse desert. As we have already seen, the garden and desert are two sides of

¹¹⁵ This is the world of “Machtquanta,” which stands in opposition to “die Sinnensprache des Menschen” and its falsehood of causality: “[w]ir sind aus der Gewohnheit nicht herausgetreten, zu der uns Sinne und Sprache verleiten. Subjekt, Objekt, ein Thäter zum Thun, das Thun und das, was es thut, gesondert: vergessen wir nicht, daß das eine bloße Semiotik und nichts Reales bezeichnet. Die Mechanik als eine Lehre der Bewegung ist bereits eine Übersetzung in die Sinnensprache des Menschen” (*Der Wille zur Macht, eKGWB/NF-1888* 14:79, Nachgelassene Fragmente, Frühjahr 1888).

¹¹⁶ Zarathustra gets at the “truth” of language when in “On the Superior Human” (“Vom höheren Menschen”) he says, “Whoever cannot lie does not know what truth is” (“Wer nicht lügen kann, weiß nicht, was Wahrheit ist”) (Nietzsche and Parkes 253; Nietzsche 235). See also *eKGWB/WL* 1, “Ueber Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinne”: “[Der Mensch] vergißt also die originalen Anschauungsmetaphern als Metaphern und nimmt sie als die Dinge selbst” (§ 1).

¹¹⁷ As Kleinschmidt writes, “[d]ie offenkundige Überdeterminiertheit und Ambivalenz der Schreibweise Nietzsches ist Kalkül. Die Denk- und Ausdrucksbewegungen des Textes schliessen so auch das Nichtgewusste und Nichtgesagte, das Vergessene mit ein. Zarathustra, ‘dieser jasagendste aller Geister’, ist zugleich einer, der ‘mit jedem Wort’ widerspricht: ‘in ihm sind alle Gegensätze zu einer neuen Einheit gebunden.’ (*Ecce Homo*, “Also sprach Zarathustra 6: 343).”

the same figural coin. Both are productive, even necessary, and yet both must be maintained in a relationship of perpetual tension.

Bearing all this in mind, we can think of Nietzsche's work as comprising a desert which consists, as it were, of vacillating grains of sand. In its attempt to uncover the buried origins of Western morality and to recover the playfully destructive and creative attitude towards language and life exemplified by the "mythically-inspired" Greeks, Nietzsche's genealogical project engages in, and enacts remembrance. And yet the transvaluation of values and the emergence of the Overhuman [*der Übermensch*] also entail a willful act of overcoming, or "forgetting" the self and all that hinders new life from emerging (e.g. Christian morality). As Heidegger suggests in his essay "Wer ist Nietzsches Zarathustra?" ("Who is Nietzsche's Zarathustra?"), this inherent tension need not be thought of in terms of a paradox, but can be imagined as forming a ring-like unity (Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe* 7, 104). Indeed, where memory is present, forgetting is always already "co-present" (Kleinschmidt 133). This is because memory and forgetting function in an integrative manner, with memory's "turn toward" something always involving a "turn away" from something else (Figal 57).¹¹⁸ In Heidegger's reading, this turn is one towards Being [*Sein*], which is only achievable through the forgetting of becoming [*Werden*] (Figal 55–56).¹¹⁹ As Nietzsche famously formulated in the fragments published posthumously as *Der Wille zur Macht* (*The Will to Power*), imposing the character of being upon becoming ["[d]em Werden den Charakter des *Seins* aufzuprägen"] was "the supreme will to power" ["der höchste Wille zur Macht"], just as "the closest approximation of a world of becoming to a world of being" was the insight that "everything recurs" ["Daß Alles wiederkehrt, ist die extremste *Annäherung* einer *Welt* des *Werdens* an die des *Seins*"] (Nietzsche, Kaufmann, and Hollingdale 330; Nietzsche, *eKGWB/NF 1886* 7:54). As the site of eternal return, the desert simultaneously contains, and consists of both memory and oblivion. On the one hand, the "new desert" of "godlessness, worthlessness and *meaninglessness*" entails a necessary act of overcoming and forgetting the self. Yet despite producing this oblivion, the desert still bears traces of memory. Here I refer not only to the idea, also present in Nietzsche, that all thought is remembrance (Nietzsche, *eKGWB/NF 1881* 11:133).¹²⁰ More relevant here is Heidegger's conception of memory as *Andenken*, or a "turn toward" that which gives itself and, indeed, demands to be thought. For Zarathustra, what demands to be thought is the human condition of being a "ein Seil, geknüpft zwischen Tier und Übermensch - ein Seil über einem Abgrunde" ["a rope, fastened between beast and Overhuman – a rope over an abyss"] (Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* 13). This metaphor vividly expresses human beings' precarious state of incompleteness, their need to overcome themselves by crossing over and under to a morality beyond good and evil. The complimentary metaphor of the child, the product of the third transformation of the spirit in the third "desert," embodies human beings' need to reimagine their relationship with life and the past: to overcome the "Widerwille gegen die Zeit und ihr 'Es war'" ["ill-will toward time and its 'It was'"] (Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* 116; Heidegger, *Was heisst Denken?* 55–60). All of this is achievable through the birth – both inner and outer - of a new cycle, a "self-propelling wheel," an eternal recurrence of self-destruction and self-creation (Volkmann-Schluck 13).

The figure of the child is central to Nietzsche's non-hermeneutic project. More than just a symbol of rebirth and renewal, the child embodies a presence of "extreme temporality," a "birth"

¹¹⁸ "Jedes Hinsehen gründet in ein Absehen."

¹¹⁹ "Der Glaube ans eigene Sein ist gleichbedeutend mit Werdensvergessenheit."

¹²⁰ "Wir können nur 'wollen', was wir gesehen haben – also seit der Ausbildung des Auges giebt es erst Vorstellungen im Gedächtniß, und diesen, wenn sie stark genug reizen, folgen dann Handlungen."

that “effaces itself and brings itself back” (Gumbrecht 58).¹²¹ The presence it produces is distinctly non-hermeneutic, since the child gives figure to the recovery of a pre-verbal (*in-fans*) and thus non-linguistic memory which resides in the body. Nietzsche addresses this physiological memory of muscles and nerves in *Will to Power*. There he speaks of art’s power of suggestion over the muscles and senses (Nietzsche, Kaufmann, and Hollingdale 427–428; Nietzsche, *eKGWB/NF 1888* 14:119)¹²² According to Nietzsche, art not only strengthens the body and inflames the passions; it also revives forgotten memories of Dionysian intoxication: “Alle Kunst wirkt tonisch, mehrt die Kraft, entzündet die Lust (d.h. das Gefühl der Kraft), regt alle die feineren Erinnerungen des Rauschen an. -- es giebt ein eigenes Gedächtniß, das in solche Zustände hinunterkommt: eine ferne und flüchtige Welt von Sensationen kehrt da zurück” [“All art works tonically, increases strength, inflames desire (i.e. the feeling of strength), excites all the more subtle recollections of intoxication – there is a special memory that penetrates such states: a distant and transitory world of sensations here comes back”]. In its own unique, vacillating manner, Nietzsche’s two-fold project of memory and forgetting thus aims to reactivate the “special memory” [*eigenes Gedächtniß*] of this fleeting world of sensation. Importantly, this activation of memory is attempted within the “new desert” of godlessness, valuelessness and oblivion.

As the privileged site of remembrance, forgetting and critique, the desert is a worthy object of Nietzsche’s praise. Wherever a more typically negative conception of the desert appears in Nietzsche’s writing, it often serves as a foil. Take, for example, the poem *Der Freigeist* (“The Free Spirit”) from 1884. Of the several unpublished desert writings composed during the same period in which Nietzsche was writing the fourth part of *Zarathustra* (1883–1885) (Schönert 186),¹²³ this poem is probably the best known and most widely read.¹²⁴ Possibly due to this overlapping period of composition, “Der Freigeist” contains echoes of the wanderer-shadow’s song in its *Weh dem / Wohl dem* formulations. Nietzsche deploys this echo to critique the more conventional view of the desert presented in the first six strophes, which portray the desert as a “terrifying image of nothingness” [*Schreckbild des Nichts*] (Elm 105) and existential threat to the Free Spirit who has left the moral certainties of the city for “a thousand deserts mute and cold.”¹²⁵ Nietzsche dismisses this simplistic understanding of the desert through the ironic two-strophe reply that concludes the poem. In it, the Free Spirit mocks the first speaker’s

¹²¹ Here Gumbrecht quotes Nancy’s *The Birth to Presence*.

¹²² “Alle Kunst wirkt als Suggestion auf die Muskeln und Sinne, welche ursprünglich beim naiven künstlerischen Menschen thätig sind: sie redet immer nur zu Künstlern, -- sie redet zu dieser Art von feiner Erreglichkeit des Leibes.”

¹²³ See also (Nietzsche, *eKGWB/NF-1885*, 35:47, Nachgelassene Fragmente, Mai–Juli 1885): “Weder Pessimisten noch Optimisten. Schopenhauer’s große Stellung — daß die Zerstörung einer Illusion noch keine Wahrheit ergibt, sondern nur ein Stück Unwissenheit mehr, eine Erweiterung unseres „leeren Raums“, einen *Zuwachs unserer inneren „Oede.“* A version of this fragment appears in Book III of *Will to Power* (# 603): “That the destruction of an illusion does not produce truth but only one more piece of ignorance, an extension of our ‘empty space,’ an increase of our ‘desert’” (Nietzsche, Kaufmann, and Hollingdale 327).

¹²⁴ This text is also known by the title “Vereinsamt” (“All alone”).

¹²⁵ As Zarathustra proclaims in the chapter “Von den berühmten Weisen” (“On the Famous Wise Men”), the desert is the rightful home of the free-spirit: “In der Wüste wohnten von je die Wahrhaftigen, die freien Geister, als der Wüste Herren; aber in den Städten wohnen die gutgefütterten, berühmten Weisen – die Zugtiere” [“It is always in deserts that the truthful have dwelt, the free spirits, as the desert’s masters; but it is in the cities that the well-nourished, famous wise men dwell – the draught animals.”] (Nietzsche *Also sprach Zarathustra* 85; Nietzsche and Parkes 89).

“sideways-reason” [*Quer-Verstand*] and comfortable “German parlor-happiness” [*dumpfe[s] deutsche[s] Stuben-Glück*]. I quote the poem in full:

Die Krähen schrei´n
Und ziehen schwirren Flugs zur Stadt;
Bald wird es schnei´n —
Wohl dem, der jetzt noch — Heimat hat!

Nun stehst du starr,
Schaust rückwärts ach! wie lange schon!
Was bist du Narr
Vor Winters in die Welt — entflohn?

Die Welt — ein Thor
Zu tausend Wüsten stumm und kalt!
Wer Das verlor,
Was du verlorst, macht nirgends Halt.

Nun stehst du bleich,
Zur Winter-Wanderschaft verflucht,
Dem Rauche gleich,
Der stets nach kältern Himmeln sucht.

Flieg´, Vogel, schnarr´
Dein Lied im Wüsten-Vogel-Ton! —
Versteck´, du Narr,
Dein blutend Herz in Eis und Hohn!

Die Krähen schrei´n
Und ziehen schwirren Flugs zur Stadt:
Bald wird es schnei´n,
Weh dem, der keine Heimat hat.

Antwort

Daß Gott erbarm'!
Der meint, ich sehnte mich zurück
In's deutsche Warm,
In's dumpfe deutsche Stuben-Glück!

Mein Freund, was hier
Mich hemmt und hält ist dein Verstand,

The crows caw
And move in whirring flight to the city:
Soon it will snow —
Happy is he who yet—has a home!

Now you stand stiffly,
Gazing backwards alas! for how long!
Why, you fool,
Did you flee before winter into the world?

The world—a gate
To a thousand wastelands silent and cold!
Whoever has lost
What you've lost, never stops anywhere.

Now you stand pale,
Cursed to winter wandering,
Like the smoke
That always seeks colder skies.

Fly, bird, rasp out
Your song to the tune of a wasteland bird! —
Hide, you fool,
Your bleeding heart in ice and scorn!

The crows caw
And move in whirring flight to the city:
Soon it will snow,
Woe to him who has no home!

Reply

God have mercy!
He thinks I long to return
Into the German warmth,
Into dull German parlor-happiness!

My friend, what slows
and holds me here is your reason,
Pity on you!

Mitleid mit dir!
Mitleid mit deutschem Quer-Verstand!
(Schönert 185)¹²⁶

Pity on German sideways-reason!¹²⁷

Whether this poem constitutes a “dramatic monologue” [*Rollengedicht*] (Schönert 186) inside the mind of the Free Spirit, or represents an external dialogue with a second figure, it nevertheless presents two perspectives on the same moment of hesitation. After setting out into the “thousand deserts mute and cold,” Nietzsche’s Free Spirit pauses to look back upon the city he has just left (“Nun stehst du starr / Schaust rückwärts ach!”). From the perspective of the first speaker, who inhabits a realm of “German warmth,” this moment of apparent fear (“Nun stehst du starr / ... Nun stehst du bleich”) and uncertainty deserves both scorn (“Versteck’, du Narr,”) and pity (“Weh dem, der keine Heimat hat.”). Yet as one of the alternative titles for the poem makes clear (“Pity back and forth,” “Mitleid hin und [wieder] her”) (Schönert 188), the Free Spirit parries the first speaker’s misplaced pity with his own (“Mitleid mit dir!”). As he explains, his hesitation comes not from any desire to re-enter the “dull German parlor-happiness;” rather, he pauses out of pity¹²⁸ for the first speaker’s “German sideways-reason” [*deutschem Quer-Verstand*], which prevents him from seeing the desert of nihilism as a necessary refuge from Western morality.

II: The Desert Transvalued

In their work on this poem, scholars have only partially elaborated the extent to which Nietzsche’s revaluation of the desert and *Freigeist* figure mobilize the wilderness discourses of medieval German mystics and their critics. Norman Cohn, for one, has called the medieval heretics of the Free Spirit “remote precursors of Bakunin and of Nietzsche - or rather of that bohemian intelligentsia which during the last half-century has been living from ideas once expressed by Bakunin and Nietzsche in their wilder moments” (Cohn 148). But as Robert Lerner writes, the comparisons between these Free Spirits and the student rebellions in the late 1960s confuse “*tunc* with *nunc*.” The medieval Free Spirit movement, if it did exist, was “far more typical of the late medieval search for God and godliness than has commonly been supposed” (Lerner 3). Many in the late Middle Ages regarded Meister Eckhart as the father of this heresy, since its purported tenets of autotheism and antinomianism - that human beings could achieve an undifferentiated union with God on earth, and that in this union a soul could ignore moral law (Lerner 1), were among the twenty-eight articles in the papal bull of condemnation brought against Eckhart in 1329, nearly one year after his death. For orthodox disciples of Eckhart such as John Tauler and Henry Suso, the task was thus to defend their master’s legacy against persistent charges of heresy and to clear up what they considered misreadings of his texts. Suso’s

¹²⁶ eKGWB/NF-1884,28[64] — Nachgelassene Fragmente Herbst 1884.

¹²⁷ Translation by The Nietzsche Channel © 2002: <http://www.thenietzschechannel.com/poetry/poetry-dual.htm#thefreespirit>. Translation modified.

¹²⁸ This is an example of Zarathustra’s “pitying that is no crucifixion,” which he contrasts with the pity of “the Cross upon which he who loves humankind is nailed” (Nietzsche and Parkes 13). This passage appears in Zarathustra’s prologue, in which Zarathustra proclaims: “Die Stunde, wo ihr sagt: ‘Was liegt an meinem Mitleiden! Ist nicht Mitleid das Kreuz, an das der genagelt wird, der die Menschen liebt? Aber mein Mitleiden ist keine Kreuzigung’” (Nietzsche *Also sprach Zarathustra* 12).

Little Book of Truth (Daz buechli der warheit) (1327-1334), for example, was written under the “immediate impress” of Eckhart’s trial for the purpose of “lecturing the papal curia as well as heretical beguards” on the proper nature of Eckhart’s teachings (Lerner 186). In it, we find a chapter entitled “In what points those men are found wanting who have false freedom” (“Uff welen puncten dien menschen gebristet, die valsche friheit fuerent”). Here, Suso’s fictional disciple holds a disputation on Eckhart’s teachings of differentiation, [*underscheit*], detachment [*rehter gelazsenheit*], and freedom [*rehten friheit*] with the curious figure of “the nameless Wildness” [*daz namenlose wilde*], whom he encounters while meditating “in the stillness of his mind” [*in der stilli sins gemuetes*]. The chapter is staged as a interior dialogue with this “nameless” Free Spirit, whose moniker most translators render as “the nameless Wild Man,” but whose grammatical gender is markedly neuter [*daz; es*]. Given this fact, we can translate it literally as “the nameless Wildness.”¹²⁹ In this important sense, Suso’s disciple does not so much encounter a “Wild Man,” as enter into a “nameless” desert within himself. Although his dialogue never indicates any risk that the disciple might fall victim to the confusion and temptation of this heretical “Wildness,” it anticipates the fraught uncertainties of Nietzsche’s two poems. Like the wanderer-shadow, for example, Suso’s “nameless Wildness” is marked by a radical negativity and lack of defined origin. Claiming to have come from nowhere and to want nothing, it recalls the common mystical trope of self-annihilation or self-forgetting in undifferentiated union with God (Lerner 187), an idea present in many medieval Christian mystical settings, not only Eckhart’s. Yet despite this historical and cultural specificity, Suso’s “nameless Wildness” anticipates the desert wilderness from which Nietzsche’s wanderer-shadow springs. I quote in full the beginning of the disciple’s dialogue:

[Der Iunger] hub an und sprach zu im also:
Wannen bist du?

Es sprach: Ich kam nie dannen.

Er sprach: Sag mir, waz bist du?

Es sprach: Ich bin niht.

Er sprach: Was wilt du?

Es antwurte und sprach: Ich wil nut.

Er sprach aber: Dis ist ein wunder. Sag mir,
wie heizest du?

Es sprach: Ich heisse daz namenlos wilde.

Der Iunger sprach: Du macht wohl heissen daz
wilde, wan dinu wort und antwurte sint *gar*
wilde. Nu sag mir eins, des ich dich frage:
Wa lendet din bescheidenheit?

Es sprach: In lediger friheit. (Seuse, Sturlese,
and Blumrich 56)

[The disciple] began and spoke to him thus:
Where are you from?

It said: I came from nowhere.

He said: Tell me, what are you?

It said: I am nothing.

He said: What do you want?

It answered and said: I want nothing.

He spoke once more: This is strange. Tell me,
what is your name?

It spoke: I am called ‘the nameless Wildness.’

The disciple said: You may well be called ‘the
Wild One,’ for your words and answers are
wild indeed. Now, tell me one thing I ask you:
Where does your wisdom lead to?

It said: To complete liberty. (Seuse and Clark
201)¹³⁰

Like the wanderer-shadow, the “nameless Wildness” is a literal and figural embodiment of the desert’s paradoxical negativity and productiveness. One key difference, of course, is that for Suso, this negativity is an essential aspect of God’s “transcendent actuality” [*ubertreffender ihtekeit*] (Seuse, Sturlese, and Blumrich 58; Seuse and Clark 202) from which all “ordered

¹²⁹ *daz* [modern German *das*] is the neuter definite article. See (Seuse and Clark 201).

¹³⁰ Translation modified.

distinctions” [*aller ordenlicher underscheit aller dingen*] arise. As his disciple makes clear, in moments of mystical union with God one must not confuse one’s own “perception” [*nemunge*] for “essence” [*wesunge*]. In other words, one must not confuse the sensation of *feeling* one’s self to be without distinction from God with an actual state of shared ontological identity. Nietzsche, on the other hand, takes the free spirit’s ontological self-identification with God’s negativity to a nihilist extreme. Whereas Suso’s disciple upholds the orthodox hierarchy of church authority and dispels accusations of radical unity or identity with God, Nietzsche’s Free Spirit levels the ontological field between the human and divine realms by presupposing God’s death and seeking to free humanity from the shackles of Christian morality. In contrast to the words spoken by Suso’s “nameless Wildness,” those uttered by Nietzsche’s Free Spirit’s are lauded for what we might call their “wildness,” i.e. their proper transvaluation of the desert. They are praised for their strength, boldness and truth, not condemned for any heretical misunderstanding. In spite of these differences, the productive negativity of the desert figure is what links Nietzsche most clearly to his medieval precursors. What distinguishes them, of course, is how each values and mobilizes this negativity.

A similar transvaluation of the desert appears, finally, in another poetic fragment from the autumn of 1884. It comprises the following two lines: “Es erhob sich ein Geschrei um Mitternacht / - das kam von der Wüste her” [“There arose a cry at midnight / - that came from the desert”] (Nietzsche, *eKGWB/NF 1884* 28:24). Here, Nietzsche juxtaposes the figure of the desert with that of midnight, one of the most important metaphors in *Zarathustra*. There, midnight [*Mitternacht*] symbolizes the new beginning inherent in Zarathustra’s teaching of the eternal return (Zangerle 91–98). Like midday [*Mittag*], its corresponding temporal “turning point” [*Zäsur*],¹³¹ midnight represents a dream-like state of Dionysian “drunkenness” in which the constraints of rational, Apollonian thought based on identity and difference are overcome. Overcoming in this way the confines of conventional thinking entails a moment of forgetting that is the precondition for the eternal return.¹³² According to this teaching, the emphasis is no longer placed on the return of the same, as a continuity of an eternal repetition, but on the will of difference and the affirmation of change. This equals a destruction of the principle of identity. The condition of eternal return as a frame of the entire occurrence is thus the forgetting of our pre-existences.¹³³ It is important to remember that when we “forget our pre-existences,” we do so in the desert, Nietzsche’s privileged site of memory and oblivion. Thus, the midnight cry [*Geschrei*] arising from the desert is not one of terror, as the first speaker in *Der Freigeist* might have us believe; it is the wail of the pre-linguistic child, the product of the third transformation of the spirit. In contrast to the “children of woe,” the progeny of “all that suffers,” the spirit-as-child is not a distinct offspring of joy [*Lust*], but rather joy’s eternal return:

¹³¹ As Zarathustra says in the “Drunken Song” (“Das trunkne Lied”) or “Night-Wanderer Song” (“Das Nachtwandler-Lied”), “midnight is also midday” (“Mitternacht ist auch Mittag”) (Nietzsche *Also sprach Zarathustra* 263; Nietzsche and Parkes 283).

¹³² See also *WTP* 617: “To impose upon becoming [*Werden*] the character of being [*Sein*] – that is the supreme will to power” (Nietzsche, Kaufmann, and Hollingdale 330).

¹³³ “Im Denken der Ewigen Widerkehr liegt das Gewicht nicht mehr auf der Widerkehr des Gleichen, als Kontinuität einer ewigen Wiederholung, sondern auf dem Willen zur Andersheit und der Bejahung des Wandels, was einer Zerstörung des Identitätsprinzips gleichkommt. Bedingung für die Ewige Widerkehr des Gleichen als Rahmen des ganzen Geschehens ist das Vergessen unserer Präexistenzen” (Zangerle 98).

Weh spricht: ‘Vergeh! Weg, du Wehe!’ Aber alles, was leidet, will leben, daß es reif werde und lustig und sehnsüchtig, - sehnsüchtig nach Fernerem, Höherem, Hellerem. ‘Ich will Erben, so spricht alles, was leidet, ich will Kinder, ich will nicht *mich*’, - Lust aber will nicht Erben, nicht Kinder – Lust will sich selber, will Ewigkeit, will Wiederkunft, will Alles-sich-ewig-gleich. (Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* 262)

Woe says: ‘Be gone! Away, all woe!’ But all that suffers wants to live, that it may become ripe and joyful and full of yearning, - yearning for what is farther, higher, brighter. ‘I want heirs’, says all that suffers. ‘I want children, I do not want *me*.’ – But joy does not want heirs, nor children – joy wants itself, wants eternity, wants recurrence, wants all-eternally-self-same. (Nietzsche and Parkes 282)

The desert is, moreover, not just where the eternal return occurs, but also where the spirit first learns this teaching from the demon in *The Gay Science (Die fröhliche Wissenschaft)* (1882/1887): “Wie, wenn dir eines Tages oder Nachts, ein Dämon in deine *einsamste Einsamkeit* nachschliche und dir sagte: ‘Dieses Leben, wie du es jetzt lebst und gelebt hast, wirst du noch einmal und noch unzählige Male leben müssen’” [“What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: ‘This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more.’”] (Nietzsche, *eKGWB/FW* 341). This passage, taken along with the subsequent section in which Nietzsche pronounces the death of God and the unworthiness of Christianity, represents an initial stage in Nietzsche’s reclamation of the Biblical and monastic desert [*solitudo; Einsamkeit*] for his project of transvaluation. Although he ultimately empties it of the Jewish and Christian God, Nietzsche preserves the desert as a site of memory and forgetting for a new faith of affirmation and *Ja-sagen* that overcomes Christianity’s (self-)denial (Thiede 474). Of the Judeo-Christian wilderness Nietzsche fashions a “new desert” [*eine neue Oede*] (Nietzsche, *eKGWB/JGB* 12.1)¹³⁴ for a new Dionysian “Antichrist,” who each of his readers has the potential to become. As such a figure, Nietzsche’s ideal reader would drive the Christian priest “into every sort of desert” [*in jede Art Wüste*] (Nietzsche, *eKGWB/AC*, “Gesetz”),¹³⁵ while at the same time both figurally inhabiting, and literally embodying a desert of his or her own. That this ambiguous topos plays such a central role in Nietzsche’s project attests to the prominence the desert enjoyed in the Western European imagination (and certainly in Nietzsche’s religious education) (Thiede 468), and to its unique ability to negotiate between meaning and presence. By this I mean its ability simultaneously to produce acts of cognition and non-hermeneutic “flights of ideas.”

III: “If only Jesus had remained in the desert...”

¹³⁴ *Jenseits von Gut und Böse (Beyond Good and Evil)*, 12.1: “Indem der neue Psycholog dem Aberglauben ein Ende bereitet, der bisher um die Seelen-Vorstellung mit einer fast tropischen Üppigkeit wucherte, hat er sich freilich selbst gleichsam in eine neue Oede und ein neues Misstrauen hinaus gestossen” [“In that the NEW psychologist is about to put an end to the superstitions which have hitherto flourished with almost tropical luxuriance around the idea of the soul, he is really, as it were, thrusting himself into a new desert and a new distrust.”].

¹³⁵ *Der Antichrist*, “Gesetz wider das Christenthum,” Fünfter Satz.: “Mit einem Priester an Einem Tisch essen stößt aus: man excommunicirt sich damit aus der rechtschaffnen Gesellschaft. Der Priester ist uns der Tschandala, – man soll ihn verfehlen, aushungern, in jede Art Wüste treiben.”

One of most powerful moments in *Zarathustra* can be found in the chapter called “On Free Death” (“Vom freien Tod”). There Zarathustra remarks that Christ died too young “to learn to love the earth” and to recant his teachings:

“Wäre er doch in der Wüste geblieben und ferne von den Guten und Gerechten!
Vielleicht hätte er leben gelernt und die Erde lieben gelernt – und das Lachen dazu!”
(Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* 61)

“If only he had remained in the wilderness and far from the good and the righteous!
Perhaps he would have learned to live and learned to love the earth – and to laugh as well!” (Nietzsche and Parkes 64)

Once again, Nietzsche humorously inverts the traditional Christian trope of the desert as a site of temporary trial (e.g. the Israelites’ march through Sinai; Christ’s temptations in the wilderness) and settlement. In doing so, however, Nietzsche upholds the transformation (of the self, of the world) central to the desert experience. Athanasius, for example, relates that Saint Anthony wished to make the desert a city, and his cenobitic community in the Egyptian desert mirrored in its organization the secular metropolises of Alexandria and Cairo. Throughout history, many Christians have entered the desert to undergo spiritual, physical, and social renewal. Yet unlike Nietzsche’s Christ, this transformation did not typically entail learning “to love the earth.” Rather, the desert was more often a space of literal “transfer” or “carrying over” [*metaphorein*]; it was where the ontological distance between humanity and God could be momentarily bridged, (Sloterdijk 88), and a foretaste of heaven briefly savored. Even if communities of Christians “stayed in the desert,” as Saint Anthony as his followers did, they generally did so in order to get closer to heaven, not to the earth.

In contrast, Nietzsche’s transvalued figure of Christ the Free Spirit remains in the desert long enough to “learn to live and to love the earth – and even to laugh!” With this, Nietzsche inverts the Christian figure of the desert to reimagine humanity’s relationship with itself and the world.¹³⁶ For Christ’s learned laugh in the desert resembles the child’s similarly non-linguistic cry. Both announce the final transformation of the spirit, and both echo the anonymous “midnight cry” that call out from the pages of Nietzsche’s unpublished fragments. Heraldng eternal return and a love of one’s fate [*amor fati*], Christ’s laugh marks a moment in which Christ, like all others who remain in Nietzsche’s desert, becomes the desert itself, and through this embodied presence learns to love the earth in a new way. This moment of affective union with the world, in which the divide between subject and object reveals itself to be a false distinction, resists the grasp of words and meaning, and can only be felt through the more privileged instrument of knowledge: the body. For Nietzsche, the body of the Free Spirit is the body of his ideal reader, [i]n any desert more at home than in temples” (“[i]n jeder Wildnis heimischer als vor Tempeln”) (Nietzsche and Parkes 261; Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* 242). Nietzsche’s desert writing thus invites all who read it to become the non-hermeneutic “background space” in which new ways of being, experience, and creativity are possible.

¹³⁶ For Nietzsche’s dim view of (desert) monasticism we need hardly look farther than the chapter in *Zarathustra* entitled “On the Higher Man” (“Vom höheren Menschen”): “Has there been anything more filthy on earth so far than desert-saints? *Around them* not only the Devil was loose – but also the swine.” [“Gab es Schmutzigeres bisher auf Erden als Wüsten-Heilige? Um *die* herum war nicht nur der Teufel los – sondern auch das Schwein.”] (Nietzsche and Parkes 237; Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* 237).

Conclusion

In many key works of German literature, the figure of the desert is highly productive in exploring the limits of poetics, memory, thought, and experience. This productivity spans the medieval and modern periods. With the concept of “desert writing,” I have tried to shed more light on this figural productivity, and to forge a lens through which underacknowledged textual correspondences might become visible. This lens puts into sharper focus the metonymic poetics of sand, dust, and ash. These modes of writing deploy the figure of the desert to simultaneously undermine and reaffirm poetic speech and memory. The fruitful tension they produce underscores the limits of language and thought, and creates spaces of speculative and experiential possibility for author and reader to enter.

These landscapes of experience often appear as deserts themselves. In *Granum sinapis*, readers are urged “to forget” themselves as they enter the “wondrous wasteland” [*wüste wunderlich*] beyond creation. In this “desert beyond God,” experiential knowledge of the uncreated divine and a foretaste of heaven are thought to be achievable. A similar, albeit less orthodox impulse runs through Hölderlin’s hymn *Der Einzige*, which attempts to produce a moment of poetic retention in the reader’s mind and memory. Hölderlin’s poem stages textual and extratextual encounters in deserts both literal and figural. In the literal desert [*Wüste*], Christ, Bacchus, and Hercules achieve a unity in which their typological similarities and essential differences are upheld. In the figural desert of Hölderlin’s “holy writing” [*heilige Schrift*] itself – which consists of shifting, unstable “grains of sand,” and thus remains paradoxically “literal” – Christ, the poet, and the reader “seize” [*erhaschet*] a “trace of word” [*eine Spur / Doch eines Wortes*] and halt the flow of poetic speech. Hölderlin held out hope that such retention could produce an ontological unity between the individual and the objective world. We find an earlier iteration of this hope in the *Hyperion* novel. Yet just as *Der Einzige* highlights the sand-like qualities of language, *Hyperion* concludes with a reminder that its words are “ashen” traces of a poetic fire long extinguished. As much as they point to the redemptive potential of Hyperion’s (and the reader’s) poetic memory, they place this memory squarely on the threshold between being and non-existence.

A similar tension is produced and upheld in *Der Hagestolz*. In this text, Stifter uses the figure of the desert to speculate on a world without human memory – even while this memory is contained within, and recorded by Stifter’s text itself. Stifter’s poetics of sand and dust underscores the fragility of generational memory, and the textual construct that guarantees it. In a hopeful, yet ultimately uncertain gesture, Stifter advances a poetics of fosterage that rescues Victor’s – and his own – literary, if not generational memory, while acknowledging the unstoppable spread of the desert of oblivion.

Consistent with his project of moral transvaluation [*Die Umwertung aller Werte*], Nietzsche turns the modern pathos of the growing desert on its head. In *Also sprach Zarathustra* and in other texts, Nietzsche celebrates an active forgetting that takes place in the desert of the reader’s mind and body. In this, Nietzsche redeploys Christian mystical discourses, yet he empties them of theology or transcendence. Rather than an experiential knowledge of God, Nietzsche’s text works to produce an experiential “flight of ideas” [*Gedankenflucht*]. In this state, the reader is meant to physically embody the desert, and to undergo the transformations of the spirit described by Zarathustra. In the final transformation, that of the child, the reader embodies a non-linguistic and non-hermeneutic way of being. This new mode of existing has the potential to usher in a new relationship between human beings and the world.

As the location of, and figure for a new ground of thought and experience, the desert has a long, productive history. The same can be said for its deep-seated ties to scripture, both sacred and profane, and to various conceptions of memory and forgetting. Its vast literal and figural power will ensure that the desert continues to hold sway over the imaginations of writers and thinkers for generations to come.

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