Crime and Madness in Modern Austria: Myth, Metaphor and Cultural Realities
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Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

REBECCA S. THOMAS

There is nothing particularly Austrian about madness and crime. There is, however, a specifically Austrian confrontation with these experiences beyond cultural norms that reveals much about both the criminal and the mad(wo)man, and even more about the culture that defines and encounters them. Medical and legal determinations are not based exclusively on objective science or law, but issue also from cultural assumptions and beliefs about the very nature of the criminal and the mad. This volume explores the experience of the criminal and the insane, as well as the ways in which Austrian history, cultural attitudes, prejudices and politics have defined the categories of illness and madness, and determined medical and legal responses to them. The essays contained here are interdisciplinary and multi-perspectival. Some treat shifts in medical and legal practices and institutions over time, others examine the ways in which times of war or social upheaval affect our understanding of madness and crime. Still other essays treat representations of madness and crime, as either theme or metaphor, in literature and art. The essays at hand continually revise, deconstruct, relativize and redefine the labels of crime and madness, which have frequently been used as fulcra to promote a political or social agenda.

In Michel Foucault’s groundbreaking and controversial volume *History and Madness* (1961), the author posits madness as the phenomenon beyond reason and cultural control that engenders a visceral fear within ordered society. He surveys the changing definitions of and responses to madness from the medieval period to the modern age as a means of understanding the shifting roles and relative authority of reason to unreason over centuries of Western Civilization. In his study, he interrogates institutions such as asylums and their practices, as well as the art and literature of the various ages that takes madness as its subject and theme. The present volume seeks to revisit the general spirit of Foucault’s project within the limited geo-cultural sphere of modern Austria, and to expand the inquiry to explicitly include both madness and crime, which are frequently conflated or conjoined in medical and legal analyses as well as in popular conceptions and art. The time and space of the query are
contracted to focus on modern Austrian culture, that is, Austria from the late 19th century to the present day.

Madness and crime have always provoked the reflex of control. Control may be physical, in the form of the straight jacket or the shackle, incarceration in the asylum or the prison, or removal through ostracism or death. It may come in the form of scientific or philosophical categorization, or the creation and enforcement of laws and statutes. Despite controlling efforts, however, madness and crime elude final mastery, and continue to represent the absolute other beyond cohesive bonds of cultural identification and belonging.

**Madness and Modernity**

In Hans Gabriel’s opening essay, he argues for a re-reading of the comfortable, Biedermeier world view traditionally ascribed to Adalbert Stifter. Instead, he proposes a reading of Stifter’s novels *Abdias* and *Mountain Crystals* that reveals a grave unease with the recognition of reason’s inability to master what Stifter posits as the irrationality of the natural world. Traditional world views in which the universe and nature are assumed to be ordered and rational objects whose secrets could be disclosed through objective, scientific observation, give way to modern view characterized by skepticism regarding both the rational structure of the universe and reason’s capacity to comprehend or represent it. Gabriel’s essay forms the bridge out of the 19th century into the modern era under consideration in this volume.

The essays that follow treat iconic works of Viennese Modernism. They reveal a fascination with the limits of reason, defining the causes and symptoms of madness, and the link between crime and the irrational. The correspondences among the representations in science, literature, art and music are striking, and reveal a profound fascination with understanding and representing dissonances beneath the veneer of cultural stability. Katherine Arens’ essay on Sigmund Freud explores the “medicalizing of the subject” in Freud’s discourse and practice of psychoanalysis, and reveals the mythmaking regarding the definition of mental illness, the authority of psychoanalysis as a discipline, and of Freud as a cultural icon. In his essay on Gustav Klimt and Robert Musil, Stefan Kutzenberger offers an interpretation of how both Klimt and Musil dissect and represent the pathologies of Viennese society in modernity. In each, metaphors of illness, madness and violence abound as markers of a culture out of joint and beyond the control of reason. Robert Musil links psychoanalysis with the crime narrative in his depiction of Moosbrugger, the psychopathic sex
murderer in his epic novel *The Man Without Qualities*. Musil’s musings on the conjunction and disjunction of reason and irrationality in modern man and society also reveal the polarities and correspondences between science and art. His project is largely one of situating madness, crime, unreason, and the irrational within a rationalized culture in which the logic of science and commerce dominated. In his famous university paintings, Gustav Klimt was also concerned with representing the elements of life beyond the control of medicine, philosophy and law, calling into question both the limits of reason and the achievements of culture. Lyle Barkhymer’s essay on Alban Berg’s *Wozzeck* explores the individual’s impotence in the face of biological and cultural forces which, often irrational themselves, lead to a descent into madness and crime. Barkhymer provides an analysis of the text as well as the musicological representation of madness and crime in the opera.

**Gender, Madness and Law**

Given the relationship between power and medical and legal classification, it is not surprising that women have often been pathologized as mad or criminal. Sigmund Freud’s theories of sexuality propounded at the beginning of the twentieth century were based entirely on the model of the male norm and female aberration. His studies on hysteria and the biological predisposition of the female subject to mental instability could only reinforce prevailing stereotypes of the sort codified by Otto Weininger in *Sex and Character*. Freud’s essays on the theory of sexuality and Weininger’s magnum opus *Sex and Character* were particularly influential in purveying negative stereotypes about the female body and mind.

The guise of scientific and socio-historical discourse lent legitimacy to both Freud's and Weininger's claims that women are aberrant per se. Each emphasized the role of gender in assessing proclivities towards madness and crime. It is no accident that Freud’s theories came under vigorous critique during the early 20th centuries as the women’s movement gained momentum, and as women were becoming increasingly visible within the public sphere. Susanne Hochreiter explores the courage and insight of Rosa Mayreder, who fought tirelessly to deconstruct the false assumptions and mythologies about women’s “nature” and concomitant inferior and limited social status that issued from the new sciences. The hegemony of scientific discourse at the time, the status of which had been enhanced by quantum advances in scientific understanding and technological progress, reinforced the quality of these pseudo-scientific assertions as unassailable
by non-specialists, and imbedded the accompanying assumptions about women and gender more firmly in the popular imagination. Hochreiter explores how Rosa Mayreder resists and rejects the categorizations of stereotypical or real behaviors of women as mad or criminal, and demands a more humane, inclusive rhetoric that does not stigmatize difference but seeks to understand and expand the pallet of human responses to the world.

Gender is also central to several highly visible legal conundra. The debates hovering around the criminalization of abortion, prostitution and sex trafficking, along with the consequences of juridical outcomes for medical practice are subjects for both historical inquiry and artistic representation. The question of whether or not to criminalize these actions has always been highly politicized, with arguments proffered from across the political and ideological spectrum decrying the immorality of various diametrically opposed legal positions. Should a woman receiving an illegal abortion, the physician performing the procedure, or both be tried in court? Should the prostitute or her client or both be held legally accountable in cases of prostitution? How should the legal status of prostitution or sex trafficking effect the availability and confidentiality of medical care? Gender and, less obviously immigrant status and ethnicity, play significant roles in making these legal and medical determinations. Essays in this volume treat the specifically Austrian manifestations of the intersection of gender, madness and crime. Sarah Painitz's essay explores Mela Hartwig’s treatment of Austrian abortion laws in *The Crime* and *The Fantastical Paragraph*. Painitz's essays also reveal a strong feminist reaction against Freud's influence. In their tandem essays, Lesley Bart and Lorely French explore Austria’s wrangling with the realities and representation of prostitution and sex trafficking. Bart gives a historical overview of the legal, political and feminist-theoretical debates surrounding the issue, while Lorely French interprets the literary representation of the same in Marlene Streeruwitz’s recent novel *Jessica*. Each of the essays in this section reinforces repeatedly the repression and rebellion at the intersection of psychiatry, law, and gender.

**Madness and the Arts**

The relationship of the arts to madness and crime is multi-dimensional. Since the early 19th century in the literature of the German speaking world, madness has been linked to genius and seen as a virtual precondition for artistic production. To be “irrational” is to be gifted with a special vision that, much like the role of the jester, the fool, or the blind
in classical literature, endows the seer with the capacity to look behind the
curtain of manner and form and to speak truth about underlying or
transcendent truths regarding society and its foibles. The mad in literature
and art are often gifted with access to a deeper, more authentic perception.
In his essay on madness in Austrian literature, Geoff Howse explores the
tension between real sufferings of real people with mental illness and
fictional representations of madness. Howse investigates key works of
Austrian literature and what they reveal about the interface between the
mad and society, and how the discourse of the mad is mediated by
"patrons," who allow the reader to follow the mad person to "the
vanishing point of the uninterpretable" (Howse, 176).

A survey of institutions involved in the treatment of mental illness
gives insight into changing attitudes about psychiatry and assessments of
the nature of mental illness per se, but also into the politics and culture of
institutions and the effects of these non-medical judgments on patient care.
Here one also witnesses the complex interplay between madness and art in
terms of both production and representation. The essays in this section that
treat asylum planning and practices at the turn of the century conjoin the
realms of art and science in a way particular to the age, the emblem of
which may be Otto Wagner’s architectural plan for the church at the
Viennese mental asylum Steinhof. Neo-romanticism that was prevalent in
literary and artistic theory at the time emphasized the cult of genius often
linked with eccentricity or madness. The finely attuned nerves of the artist
are invoked by the playful adaptation of the term neu-romantik (German
for neo-romantic) to neuro-mantic by contemporaries who emphasized the
neurotic hypersensitivity they diagnosed in turn-of-the-century artists. As
Luke Heighton explores in his essay on art in the asylum, the self-
representation of the mad became an object of both clinical and aesthetic
fascination during this time. Heighton explores the intersection of
aesthetic and psychiatric theory at the turn of the century through an
examination of two expositions (1898 and 1908) featuring works by
psychiatric patients and an in-depth look at the work of the manic-
depressive painter Joseph Karl Raedler. The essay provides a fascinating
reception history of the art of the insane in Austria, as well as clues to its
interpretation.

In addition to pondering the relationship between madness and genius
and the representation of psychological states in art, the effect of the arts
on the mentally ill as consumers rather than producers was also a hotly
debated topic among medical professionals and patient advocates. This
resulted not only in the construction of architectural masterpieces such as
Wagner’s church at Steinhof, but also the installation of theaters in a
number of asylums such as Mauer-Öhling. These theaters were intended to entertain, but also to contribute to a healing. Julie M. Johnson explores the theory and practice of therapeutic theater at Mauer-Öhling. In her essay, Pamela Saur explores Gerhard Roth's fascination with the asylum Gugging, a therapeutic center in which the patients are encouraged to produce and exhibit art. Saur provides an overview of the development of practices at Gugging, as well as an analysis of Roth's essayistic and fictional treatments of the asylum as a representation of Austrian attitudes and a reflection of Austrian culture.

(War) Crimes and Terror

While characterizations of crime in the era between the collapse of empire and the end of the Second World War were largely metaphorical for cultural dislocation and angst accompanying modernism, the paradigm shifted radically in the wake of the horrific events of World War II and the holocaust. Whereas the First World War’s primary cultural significance for Austria was the crescendo towards the collapse of a centuries-old political and cultural order that left a void of cultural identity and stability, the Second World War and the Shoah imprinted historical realities upon the Austrian national identity from which it would spend decades trying to hide. If the legal system relies on disclosing the truth about events to establish innocence or guilt, it is apparent that a national obviation of the facts regarding Austrian involvement in the war and the holocaust would jeopardize the state’s ability to function as an unbiased arbiter and authority on matters of right and wrong.

The case of Austrian reluctance to come to terms with its past and atone for its culpability in a war in which it had backed the unrighteous cause of Nazism is complicated further when one contemplates the demand of the victors that war crimes be prosecuted in the post-war era. How is responsibility to be assigned within a military structure that relies on obedience to authority and orders? What, within the brutal economy of war, counts as a war crime? Does the reality of war relativize what may properly be held as mad or criminal? Is the distinction merely one of state sanction versus rogue vigilante action? In this section, crime and madness are diffused onto a broader canvass of national political engagement. There are multiple layers of complexity associated with the paradigm, in which war abrogates norms of restraint and violence. Perhaps the most significant of these is whether and how crime and justice can be defined and served within the wartime ethos.
Winfried Garscha considers the "excesses of violence" in the final phases of the war. From his position as an archivist with the Austrian Research Center for Post War Trials, Garscha has a unique vantage on both the nature of war crimes committed and the implications of the post war prosecution and sentencing of those criminals involved.

In his essay on the bombing campaigns in South Tirol in the 1960s, Georg Grote provides an overview of the events surrounding these campaigns, along with a historiography of the writing and re-writing of the events in Tirolean history. He explores the changing views of the activists as freedom fighters and terrorists, and considers the importance of the mythmaking surrounding the bombers, in which they achieve a status of "founding fathers" of Tirolean regional identity.

Theodore Fiedler gives a detailed analysis of Austrian author Peter Handke's controversial "uncritical pro-Serbian views on the bloody unraveling of Yugoslavia in the 1990s" (Fiedler, 306) and the justice pursued against Serbian war criminals by the Hague Tribunal. The former Yugoslavia's historical connection to the Habsburg Empire along with Handke's position as one of the best-known post-war Austrian writers makes his literary and polemical responses to these events of central interest to the study of conflicting Austrian attitudes regarding terror, war crimes and Austria's role in the New Europe.

Günter Haika compares and contrasts two divergent Austrian confrontations with the terror attacks of September 11. This essay provides close analysis of two works by the contemporary Austrian authors Kathrin Röggla and Paulus Hochgatterer, and provides uniquely Austrian perspectives on America's response to terror and its consequences for global culture.

**Crime and Madness: Reality and Metaphor**

In the post war period, in addition to the concrete, although far from straightforward, issues of dealing with war crimes, was the founding myth of Austria’s victim status during the Anschluss, the period during WWII in which Austria disappeared as an independent nation state after its annexation into greater Germany. The notion that the Second Republic depended on repressed memory of the truth regarding events related to the war, war crimes and the holocaust for its identity as well as economic and political recovery became a fixture of Austrian discourse in the era following the Waldheim election in 1986. It is not accidental that critics such as Gerhard Roth, in his monumental, multivolume work *The Archives of Silence*, fixates on characters who are criminal and insane, and on the
legal and medical systems which are authorized to diagnose and treat them. In the preface to The Story of Darkness, volume six of the cycle, Roth’s stated intentions might be generalized as the project of his generation: “From the beginning I intended to write a novel about Austria, about the openly apparent insanity of Austrian history, and the hidden madness of Austrian everyday life.” The essays in this section are bound by the authors' concern for the lingering effects of past crimes on contemporary culture, and on the persistent effects the madness of war exercises over fundamental, defining issues within both the medical and legal communities. These essays focus on literal and metaphorical representations of madness in fiction, and on postwar literature as a mirror of societal dysfunction.

In her essay, Dagmar Lorenz contrasts Elias Canetti's critique of prewar Austrian bourgeois society with Veza Canetti's fictional representations of the Anschluss and war years. In each case, she focuses on representations of crime and madness as keys to representing Austrian society's descent into the moral and intellectual abyss of Nazism.

Thomas Bernhard was among the most outspoken and controversial postwar authors to take on the Oedipal struggle of criticizing the previous generation for its complicity in war crimes and the holocaust. Joseph Moser provides analyses of Bernhard's first novel, Frost, and his final novel, Extinction, through which he follows Bernhard's aggressive case against what he deemed the pervasive criminality of Austrian culture both during and after the war. Moser explores Bernhard's contention that Austria's embrace of Nazism was related to faschistoid tendencies in the Austrian clerical state prior to the war, thus undermining the contention that Nazism was an external ill forcibly imposed on Austria by the Germans and focusing on the particularly Austrian manifestation of fascism and anti-Semitism.

Rebecca Thomas's essay treating Doron Rabinovic's Search for M., follows the path of historical continuities preceding and flowing from Austria's complicity in the holocaust and war into the second generation of holocaust survivors. As a young Jewish writer with personal ties to both Austria and Israel, Rabinovic addresses the need for personal and national healing. In the novel, psychological dysfunction and crime hover between realistic depiction of history and loss, and metaphorical representation of a culture whose repressed memories of guilt and suffering continue to deform it.

Taken together, these essays suggest that madness and crime constitute an extended metaphor for the preconditions and consequences of Austria's embrace of Nazism.
Madness and Crime in a Postmodern Mood

In Austrian postmodern fiction and cinema, the final inversion of madness and normality triumphs in representations of the world as madhouse narrated through fracture, disjuncture, and multi-perspectival forms. The reading and viewing of these works replicates popular notions of madness and socio-pathological states of mind, in which reason is undermined as a myth and a nexus of events seemingly unrelated by causality or sense washes over the viewer who experiences the rootlessness of the mind unmoored from an ordered universe. The dissolution of all external authority, systems of order and meaning is made palpable through the aesthetic representation of the discourses of madness and crime.

In her essay on Wolf Haas, Helga Schreckenberger explores the author's use of the popular fiction format of the detective novel as a vehicle for representing, commenting on and deconstructing Austrian postwar identities. Postmodernism dismantles boundaries between high and low culture, and this trend probed in Schreckenberger's essay, which probes the potential of popular detective fiction as a vehicle for representing a critical agenda. Schreckenberger illuminates the ways, both structural and linguistic, in which Haas's crime novels dismantle the postwar construction of a pastoral Austrian identity.

Robert von Dassanowsky's essay on Alois Hotschnigg's novel *Leonardo's Hands* examines the ways in which Hotschnigg's prose proceeds from and leads to a postmodern perspective in which individual and national identities are unmasked as not merely false, but indeed totally fictional. Here questions of guilt and crime are both historically bound to the reception of the Holocaust and war, and simultaneously transcendent of this historical specificity in their conclusions about the ultimate irrationality of existence itself. Reason and sanity are here revealed as illusory constructs. Dassanowsky pursues Hotschnigg's postmodern claims that the apparently cohesive meta-narrative of national and personal identity obscures what is, in reality, a "collage of individual mythologies" (Dassanowsky, 446). Placing Hotschnigg firmly in the tradition of Schnitzler and Kafka, Dassanowsky provides a uniquely Austrian take on the central questions posed by postmodernist discourses of reason and madness.

Finally, Oliver Speck delivers an analysis of the ways in which Michael Haneke's films stage madness and crime as acts of defiance against an increasingly malignant postmodern global consumer culture. In the course of his essay, Speck initiates the reader into Haneke's varying
forms of cinematic madness, all of which lead the viewer to an experience of the journey away from the notion of a normative truth against which madness or sanity might be measured, and instead into a fragmented perspective on the world as composed of multiple competing truths. The discourse of madness is thus transformed into a vehicle of liberation from "the global culture of so-called post modernity" (Speck, 463).

Conclusion

In the final analysis, this volume has its strength in the kaleidoscopic, multi-perspectival approach that seeks to represent and understand the juncture of reality, metaphor and myth with respect to mental illness and crime in Austrian literature and culture. From the real sufferings of human beings afflicted with mental illness, to the social and moral imperatives implied by research into political rather than medical or legal classification of madness and crime, the survey of developing attitudes and trends in policy and practice reveals much about Austria’s cultural self-awareness and self-creation. The metamorphoses in clinical and legal institutions tell us about Austrian views and values in particular historical moments. The aesthetic treatments and representations of madness and crime render complex legal, medical, moral and political issues comprehensible on both intellectual and visceral levels. It is largely on the basis of these aesthetic renderings that the horizon of possibilities regarding inclusion or exclusion from the ranks of the socially acceptable is expanded. The relationship of the essays to one another has much in common with the correspondences Sigmund Freud perceived between his systematic, clinical findings and Arthur Schnitzler’s intuitive, artistic representations of the psyche. The distance between their disciplines was more one of method than of substance in the end. Both diagnosed the political and societal ills of modern life, while shedding light on the cultural roots and causes. The collection of essays presented here illuminates the shifts in practice and representation of madness and crime in modern Austria. It belongs to the specifically Austrian content of this volume that iconic Austrian figures such as Freud, Weininger, Schnitzler, Kafka, and Musil, are invoked repeatedly by the authors and critics whose own diagnosis of the Austrian condition remains connected to the cultural narrative of Austrian modernism. The interdisciplinary approach of the volume, drawing on specialists from the fields of Austrian history, psychology, art history, musicology, film studies and literature produces a rich whole in which the boundaries between “reality” and “fiction” are largely deconstructed along with the categories of madness and criminality themselves. From these
investigations proceeds the clear insight that cultural responses to crime and madness are often steeped in mythmaking as much as objective policy and practice. Conversely, literary and metaphorical representations of crime and madness reveal attitudes and cultural realities about the Austrian society that produced them and which they reflect. The essays collected here, by way of correspondences and co-illumination, serve to explicate and reveal the changing attitudes and values of modern Austria through how it classifies, treats, thematizes and represents crime and madness as subversions of constructed norms. This volume thus turns out to be as much about the normative narratives shaping modern Austrian identity and cultural politics as of the purported aberrations at the margins.

Works Cited


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**Notes**

1 It is perhaps worth noting that Weininger’s own tendency towards mental instability and schizophrenia culminated in suicide.
CHAPTER ONE

“THE FINAL IRRATIONALITY OF EXISTENCE”: THE LANGUAGE OF MADNESS AND THE MADNESS OF LANGUAGE IN STIFTER’S *ABDIAS* AND *BERGKRISTALL*

HANS GABRIEL

The name and the work of Adalbert Stifter still evoke for many Friedrich Hebbel’s contemporaneous description of him as the quintessentially Biedermeier “man of endless [narrative] studies.” In *Fin de Siècle Vienna*, for example, Carl Schorske uses Stifter’s famous (and famously long) novel *Der Nachsommer* to exemplify mid-nineteenth-century Austrian efforts to establish a reassuring aesthetic safe haven or “garden” in the wake of the failed revolutions of 1848. “To illustrate and propagate his concept of *Bildung*,” writes Schorske, “compounded of Benedictine world piety, German humanism, and Biedermeier conventionality, Stifter gave to the world his novel *Der Nachsommer*” (283). Until fairly recently, what literary-critical debate there was regarding Stifter’s work revolved primarily around the question of whether one supported or rejected this more or less universally acknowledged “Biedermeier conventionality.” As one critic writes citing another, “In general, Stifter scholarship ranges from ‘confessional confirmation and apology on the one hand, [to] ideological accusations and rejection on the other.’” Hardly the sort of work, or so it would seem, where one would expect to encounter extreme states such as madness.

In the last two decades or so, however, scholarly readings of Stifter’s work have shown an increasingly radical departure from this traditional assessment, as recent book titles such as *The Mania for Moderation, Adalbert Stifters schrecklich schöne Welt* (Adalbert Stifter’s Terribly Beautiful World) and *Geborgenheit und Gefährdung* (Security and Peril) make evident. Hebbel famously criticizes Stifter in his own day for what
he calls an “overrated Talent for minutiae that describes [the most common] things in a broad and wide-ranging manner.” And an anonymous English contemporary of Stifter’s speaks of an “effect like that of a highly finished doorway leading into mere vacant space” (“Studies by Adalbert Stifter,” 853). Recently, however, one critic admiringly claims for Stifter, “beneath the surface of Biedermeier solidity […] a vision of fracture, emptiness, meaninglessness not only more radical than that of any nineteenth-century author, but more radical than the vision of any twentieth-century author […]” (Ragg-Kirkby, 11). Another concludes approvingly that reading Stifter’s Abdias is “a matter of semiotics and […] a matter of antisemiotics […] at once” (Metz, 232). In other words, critics no longer want to see Stifter, as Schorske does, as an author seeking to cultivate a “garden” of “Biedermeier conventionality” that turn-of-the-century Viennese art will subsequently “transform” and then “explode.” On the contrary, many of these critics’ conclusions give the impression that Stifter’s work never even seeks to plant the seeds for such a garden.

The presence of such radically opposing emphases in critical readings of Stifter implies a corresponding and somewhat paradoxical coexistence of support for both views within his texts themselves. And as hyperbolic as some of their conclusions may be, modern critics have come to acknowledge this paradoxical coexistence. Thomas Mann’s famous pronouncement regarding Stifter may therefore no longer be as accurate as when he first wrote it. “More seldom,” writes Mann, “[...] has it been observed that behind the quiet, inward exactitude of precisely Stifter’s observation of nature, a tendency to the excessive, the catastrophic, the pathological is at work.” Nevertheless, the carefully controlled interdependence of the two extremes in Stifter’s work still deserves critical attention. As a direct response to Hebbel’s one-sided attack, Stifter’s Preface to [the story collection] “Many-colored Stones” of 1854 outlines the underlying aesthetic/philosophical principles on which this paradoxical coexistence of “quiet exactitude” and “catastrophic (pathological) excess” is based. Nowhere is this coexistence more carefully established, however, than in two of Stifter’s best-known short prose works, namely Abdias and Bergkristall (literally “Mountain Crystal,” usually translated as “Rock Crystal”). Neither solely reflective nor merely destructive of comforting bourgeois norms or “Biedermeier conventionality,” their representations of madness and of natural extremes reveal both a narrative acknowledgment of the impossibility of rendering these states intelligible and an unwavering determination to continue to do so. The result is a masterful simultaneous illustration in these mid-nineteenth-century Austrian narratives of both the inadequacy and the creative potential of
The Language of Madness and the Madness of Language in Stifter’s Abdias and Bergkristall

literary representation. The paradoxical structure and content of Stifter’s narratives present in “gentle,” indirect fashion the frightening threat of madness that accompanies, at least potentially, the failure or limits of human reason. In so doing, they offer a critique of language and representation that anticipates that of Nietzsche’s early writings and prefigures the full-blown ironic Sprachskepsis, or “language skepticism,” of turn-of-the-century Austrian literature.10

Stifter’s preface to his Novelle collection Bunte Steine (Many-colored Stones) has received a great deal of critical attention, and it is well beyond the focus and scope of this piece to review this discussion.11 A brief look at the Vorrede or Preface itself, however, highlights just what is at stake for Stifter in the literary treatment of “the pathological” and “catastrophic” in each of his Novellen. In the Preface, physical reality is said to point to a decidedly moral underlying natural and social force—which Stifter’s narrator calls the “gentle law.” This underlying reality is presented as an absolute, self-evident truth:

We want [wir wollen] to try to observe the gentle law that guides the human race. […] There are forces that work toward the survival of mankind as a whole that may not be checked by individual forces. […] It is the law of these forces, the law that wants everyone to be respected, honored, and unthreatened beside the other […]. (1-6, 3-4)12

The multivalence of the combination “wir wollen” in Stifter’s text here underscores the crucial, insurmountable paradox in his program. “We want to try to discern an overarching moral ‘gentle law’ from physical evidence,” is the translation most closely in line with modern German usage. In Stifter’s day, however, the combination retains something of the sense of “We will” try to do so, as well as the sense of “Let us” try to do so. Like the meaning of the modal verb here, Stifter’s description of the process by which the intangible moral “law” he posits is gleaned from and supported by physical evidence is neither strictly scientific nor solely a matter of faith and human desire. Rather, like the ambivalence between what one “will” and what one “wants to” find, it hovers uneasily but unavoidably and unabashedly between a quasi-scientific, pseudo-objective production and testing of hypotheses on the one hand and a quasi-religious belief in an underlying but imperceptible “gentle law of nature” on the other. Modern readers will recognize the structure used by proponents of intelligent design, where perceivable physical data are used to try to support a belief in the morality and/or rationality (“intelligence”) of an assumed but imperceptible underlying universal order or “design.”

Here, however, the Preface’s description of how the subsequent
literary data is to be read - indeed, the very fact that it prefaces these literary examples with this description - underscores an awareness that the cart will necessarily always come before the horse; that a comprehensible human explanation of unfathomable natural processes will always precede and never fully encompass the observed physical data that ostensibly support it. Certainly this admission then renders any such explanation fundamentally incomplete or unverifiable. Yet Stifter’s narrator nonetheless remains determined to use his powers of literary representation to continue to test our hypotheses and/or faith. We will, we want to, using an understanding of our existence that is paradoxically located between rational scientific hypothesis and irrational religious faith, to collect and (re)present physical evidence that appears to support this understanding.

As Harmut Laufhütte points out with specific reference to *Abdias* in his essay “Von der Modernität eines Unmodernen,” it is this consciously paradoxical self-positioning, more than anything else, that yields in Stifter’s work “the modernity of an unmodern man.” The paradox remains, based on a faith in the absolute existence of a rational and/or moral order on the one hand, and on its necessarily mediated or experimental basis on the other. In the calculated interdependence with which the Preface presents the opposing sides, it becomes a point of reference and a structural model for the representation of natural and psychological extremes in the *Novellen* that follow. Unlike *Bergkristall*, *Abdias* is not among the collection of stories introduced by the preface, and its publication precedes that of *Many-colored Stones*. In its efforts to represent Abdias’s madness, however, this earlier narrative mirrors exactly the structure outlined in the Preface. Thus, it, too, presents itself as one of the touchstones of Stifter’s aesthetic program, ironically and consciously generated by Stifter himself. In these stories, Stifter confronts some of the most extreme manifestations of human and natural existence imaginable, where the sense of reason that frames and guides the process breaks down. He therefore essentially compromises his own efforts in advance. Yet by leaving no stone unturned in his efforts to glimpse the “gentle law” that he himself posits, he nonetheless hopes to encourage his readers to continue to seek it out as well. The ongoing determination to observe this “gentle law,” even in the face of inscrutable physical data, then itself becomes final irrefutable evidence of such a law’s continued hypothetical existence.

The *Novelle* form Stifter adopts to represent these extreme states proves useful for more than just its brevity. By the time Stifter first published *Abdias* and *Bergkristall* in the 1840s, the *Novelle*, or short narrative tale, had already achieved considerable status as a genre in
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German-language literature. Its specific definition had been the subject of literary-critical debate since the German Romantics borrowed the term from Boccaccio and Cervantes around the beginning of the century. While critical debate about the generic definition of the Novelle remains to this day, there is general consensus, now as then, regarding the importance of characteristics such as narrative economy, a frame story, and a crucial unusual central figure or event. In his Gespräche mit Eckermann from the same period in which Stifter first published versions of Bergkristall and Abdias, Goethe offered what remains the most famous definition of the Novelle: “What is the Novelle,” he asks rhetorically, “other than an actually occurring unheard-of given event [Begebenheit]?”

The inherent paradox in Goethe’s characterization of the Novelle as an “unheard-of [but] given event” echoes perfectly the “quiet exactitude” with which “the excessive, the catastrophic, the pathological” are represented in Stifter’s texts. In both Abdias and Bergkristall, Stifter’s narrator then expands this general understanding of the genre to mirror the structure of the Preface within the Novellen themselves. As he does with the preface that frames the collection of “many-colored stones,” Stifter’s narrator eschews the traditional, specifically located frame story that often introduces individual Novellen. Instead, he frames each one with an abstract philosophical introduction that both insists on and denies a metaphysical explanation for the “unheard-of given events” that follow. The inclusion, within the narrative itself, of an abstract metaphysical frame introducing the “unheard-of, actually occurring given event” then takes the paradox in Goethe’s definition from a physical to a linguistic or representational level. Whatever degree of “truth” the representation of the event itself loses in its failure to corroborate a rational overarching moral law in any clearly determinable way, it simultaneously stands to gain in that its inexplicability makes it appear all the more persuasively “given” rather than authorially manipulated. The reverse is then of course also true. The more neatly or comprehensibly the representations fit or support the conceptual frame in which they are packaged, the less persuasive they become as actual “Begebenheiten” or “given things.” A close look at Abdias and Bergkristall—the harmless things that follow,” as the Preface calls the Novellen it frames (6)—reveals the centrality of this representational paradox as Stifter’s mid-century texts seek ways to represent convincingly the extreme reality they portray.

The narrator of Abdias begins his frame, and the Novelle as a whole, by indicating what appears from a human perspective to be an inequality in the workings of the universe. “There are people,” Stifter’s text begins,
on whom such a series of misfortunes falls out of the blue that they finally stand and let the hail-storm roll over them, just as there are others whom good fortune visits with such extraordinary willfulness that it seems as though the laws of Nature had been reversed in a given case so that things should turn out solely for their good. (21)

This relativizing gesture, in which this physical state of affairs is shown to yield an overarching but humanly constructed “explanation,” is equally immediate: “In this way the ancients arrived at the concept of fate, we at the milder one of destiny” (21). Equally immediate again, however, is the narrative assertion of something extrahuman, something “real” after all: “But there is indeed [really], too, something terrifying in the indifferent innocence with which the laws of Nature operate.” This assertion is then immediately relativized in its turn as being merely the way “it seems to us”: “so that it seems to us as though an invisible arm were reaching out of the clouds and enacting the incomprehensible before our eyes.”

This back-and-forth in the Novelle’s opening lines between what supposedly is and what only appears to us to be prefigures a similar oscillation in the presentation of the life of the title character. Abdias is a North African Jew visited by one misfortune after another. After a hundred pages or so, during which his desert home has been pillaged, his wife has died, he has moved to a remote Austrian valley, and his beloved daughter, Ditha, has first been cured of her blindness by one lightning strike, then killed several years later by another, “Abdias the Jew,” as Stifter’s narrator calls him, finally dies. “Abdias still lived thirty years after Ditha’s death,” we read. “No one knows for how long after that. […] No one knew how old he had been. Many said that it was much more than a hundred years. […] So ended the life and career of Abdias the Jew” (95). In the Novelle’s final words as in its initial ones, a masterfully controlled narrative oscillation predominates. The last sentence, which relates Abdias’s death, appears with its initial “so” to offer a sense of closure, of unequivocal certainty. Yet coming as it does immediately after the revelation that no one knows when he actually died, the “so” also links this final narrative assertion to the irresolvable uncertainty surrounding Abdias’s death and indeed most of his life: “so (in this indeterminable way) ended the life and career of the Jew Abdias.”

The narrative’s description of Abdias’s death only underscores this linguistic ambivalence further. In keeping with the uncertainty associated with the actual death, the narrative takes great pains to distance itself from any description of the actual occurrence at all. “Many people saw him sitting on the bench before his house,” we read at the end of one
“One day he no longer sat there,” the next paragraph begins; “the sun shone on the empty spot and on his fresh grave mound, from where the tips of the grass already peeped out” (95). This crucial event is hardly mentioned at all, and it is only reported well after the fact, as the tufts of grass already sprouting ironically emphasize. Indeed, Abdias himself doesn’t know when his death actually occurs: “He sat for many years […] and he did not know how long he had been sitting […]” (94).

This simultaneous narrative assertiveness and shyness in the description of Abdias’s end returns the reader to the frame with which Stifter’s narrator begins the tale. As he does at the end, the narrator takes pains at the beginning to anchor or frame his narrative and his protagonist in a reality ostensibly verified by actual eyewitnesses. “It is the Jew Abdias whose story I want to tell,” he writes,

Anyone who perhaps has heard of him or who has even sometime seen the bent ninety-year-old figure sitting in front of the little white house […] should […] as he reads, bring his image once more before his eyes […] since we have simply tried to show what Abdias was like. (23)

In other words, the narrator once again tries to convince the reader of the veracity or objectivity of his linguistically constructed scene by equating it with what has supposedly actually been physically seen. But he immediately takes a step back from this equation and ties it to a blatantly poetic metaphor. “A serene chain of flowers hangs through the infinity of the universe,” he writes, “and transmits its shimmer into men’s hearts—the chain of cause and effect—and into man’s brain was cast the most beautiful of these flowers, reason, the eye of the soul, in order to attach the chain to it” (22).

However beautiful this metaphor may be, the narrator’s recourse to it here to frame the supposed equivalence of physical and mental perception completely contradicts the realistic and objective status that he has just worked so hard to establish. The reader recognizes once more the same oscillation that informs the structure of the Preface and the uncertain certainty of the Novelle’s conclusion. This movement continues, as the narrator feels compelled to try to explain this discrepancy by taking yet another framing step backwards before actually beginning his story. “For the ancients this [flower chain] was fate,” he writes, “frightful, final, inflexible cause of events, farther than which one cannot see and beyond which nothing more exists […] for us it is destiny” (21). This final move leads the reader back to the opening lines quoted earlier, where this “Fatum,” in its turn, is described as deriving from an inscrutable state of
affairs in which some people are visited by great misfortune while others seem inordinately fortunate.

Ironically, the narrator can only really begin and end his explanation of how human reason allows him to relate an objectively descriptive narrative at the point where this supposed connection falls apart, at the point where there is no longer any objectively verifiable corroborating physical data. His replacement of inscrutable “Fate” and “Destiny” with his more comforting notion of a “flower chain of cause and effect” dependent on human reason occurs with the now-familiar mix of narrative self-assurance and uncertainty:

But in fact perhaps there is neither fate as the final irrationality of existence nor is its individual occurrence visited upon us; rather, a serene chain of flowers hangs through the infinity of the universe [...]. (22) 25

Thus, the narrator matches almost verbatim the rhetorical stance with which, only a few lines earlier, he admits the terrifyingly inhuman impassivity with which natural laws function. “But there is indeed, too, something terrifying in the indifferent innocence with which the laws of Nature operate [...]” (21). 26 Which “but” is more accurate, “but in fact” (Aber eigentlich) or “but indeed/really” (aber wirklich)? The answer, of course, is neither and both. Not surprisingly, the only thing that the narrator can “eigentlich” or “wirklich” project with absolute conviction at the end of this introductory frame is the same sense of uneasy uncertainty that pervades the Novelle’s conclusion. As a result, Stifter’s narrator begins the inconclusive conclusion of this frame, and the transition to the story itself, with the same ambivalent “wir wollen,” used in the Preface:

Let us not [wir wollen [...] nicht] ponder the nature of these things further but simply tell of a man who exemplifies much of this and of whom it is uncertain which is stranger, his destiny or his heart. In any case one is tempted by the course of lives like his [...] into a gloomy brooding about providence, destiny and the ultimate cause of all things. (22) 27

Here again, in other words, “We don’t want to” and “will not” and “let us not” stop trying to comprehend the “ultimate basis of all things” in humanly constructed representations, even as we acknowledge their uncertainty and inadequacy.

The story’s conclusion gives us no other choice. In a final aside that seems almost too casual, the narrator divulges why Abdias himself can no longer be sure of how long he has been sitting. The reason (as far as can be reasonably determined) is precisely inscrutable unreason: it is madness. “He sat for many years, [...] and he did not know how long he had sat, for
according to reliable statements, he had gone mad” (95; my emphasis).  

Given the overabundance of direct seeing and of allusions to eyes, blindness, and vision in the story, the indirectness with which this insanity is registered contains a level of irony that matches that of the (non)description of Abdias’s death. In one impressively minimal narrative stroke, Stifter’s narrator has concretized his abstract and unrepresentable “final irrationality of existence” into an ostensibly real figure that one or the other of his readers supposedly “had even seen sitting before his little white house” (22).  

At the same time, the indirectness and generality with which this concrete “final irrationality” of Abdias’s existence is registered renders it almost completely undefined. It may be hard to believe that so fleeting and indefinite a narrative moment could carry within it all the awesome weight and power of the “frightful, final, inflexible cause of events.” Yet the narrative structure here is merely taking pains to reflect the “indifferent innocence with which,” as it claims, “the laws of Nature operate […]” (3).  

After all, no one, not even Abdias himself, even knows how long his madness actually lasts.

This narrative uncertainty befits the incomprehensible state of unreason or insanity, and the narrative’s refusal to describe this state in any detail paradoxically places Abdias’s madness at the very center of the text. Unequipped to comprehend this madness, the reader must look elsewhere to find more concrete “Begebenheiten,” or “given events,” that offer insight into it. Stifter’s narrator obliges in his characteristically ambivalent way throughout the text, but nowhere more prominently than in the repeated appearance and effects of lightning strikes. Once again, the Preface to Many-colored Stones proves helpful for reading Abdias. The narrator outlines there why this particular extreme natural phenomenon so suits his aesthetic perspective, and connects it metaphorically to the sense of sight that figures so prominently in Abdias:

If we had a sensory organ for electricity and the magnetism emanating from it, such as we have eyes for the light, what a great world, what an abundance of immense phenomena would be open to us. But if we do not have this physical eye, we have the mental eye of science, and this teaches us that the electrical and magnetic forces act upon a huge scene, that it is spread over the whole earth and through the whole sky, that it flows around everything […]. Lightning is just a small feature of this force, which itself is something great in nature. (Preface 2)

Here, human reason is “the mental eye of science”; in the introductory frame of Abdias, it is “the eye of the soul.” In both cases, lightning becomes the illustrative physical example of the difference between what
is perceived by “the physical eye” and the “eye of science/the mental eye of the soul.”

To illustrate what it refers to as the “dispassion of Nature,” the introductory section of Abdias offers the following scenario:

There the Bedouin rides between the dark cloud of his sky and the yellow sand of his desert: then a light, glittering spark leaps onto his head, he feels an unfamiliar shiver run through his nerves, still hears drunkenly the thunder in his ears, and then nothing more for all eternity. (21)32

The generality of this seemingly hypothetical example is complemented by not one, but two actual lightning strikes in the story itself. The two strikes then complement one another as well. The first one hits the house with Abdias’s beloved daughter Ditha inside. Instead of killing her as in the frame example, however, it miraculously restores her vision.

When the rain was scarcely beginning to trickle softly down the roofs, there was a great crash of thunder accompanied by a flash that lit up the whole house with dazzling brightness. Immediately Abdias realized that the lightning had hit the house. […] The lightning had passed through [Ditha’s room], [and] had struck ceiling and floor so that there was thick smoke in the room. […] Ditha was […] unharmed. (79)33

Both the fleeting nature of the actual strike and the inevitably secondary human apprehension of it are finely rendered here. In the hypothetical frame example, the Bedouin can only “drunkenly” apprehend after the fact what has already occurred to him as he dies. Within the story, Abdias can also only “realize” physically what, by the time he does so, has also already finished happening, namely, “that the lightning had hit his house.” As the narrative switches to the pluperfect tense to describe the physical effects of the lightning on Ditha’s room, it becomes clear that any deeper understanding of what has happened will remain frighteningly secondary and incomplete. Indeed, in introducing the lightning strike, the narrator emphasizes both the actuality of the event and the human uncertainty regarding its greater significance. In doing so, he echoes the ironic description of lightning in his own Preface to Many-colored Stones as “merely a very small feature” of a great natural force. His description also repeats almost verbatim Goethe’s famous definition of the Novelle. “A wonderful [given] event happened,” writes Stifter’s narrator, using the same term (Begebenheit) that Goethe uses:

A given event that will remain a wonder until those great widespread forces of Nature have been fathomed […] Hitherto they [such events] have