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Forms of the Postmodern Historical Novel :
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par

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Résumé

L'émergence du postmodernisme aux Etats-unis, mouvement esthétique rejetant les dogmes modernistes, date des années 1960. En s'imposant, durant les dernières décennies du 20ème siècle, comme le paradigme esthétique de l'architecture, des arts et de la littérature, le postmodernisme a également créé les conditions propres à une renaissance du roman historique. Cependant, la fiction historique postmoderne constitue maintenant une nouvelle forme du genre basée sur la parodie, l'ironie et le scepticisme envers les discours dominants. Cette nouvelle forme ne se limite plus à la présentation des récits dans un cadre historique réaliste. Elle remet plutôt en question la validité et par conséquent la nature même du discours historique, problématisant et mettant ainsi à l'avant le processus d'interprétation et de reconstruction du passé. Dans cette optique, la fiction historique contemporaine reflète les débats actuels sur les formes de l'historiographie, débats lancés par Hayden White.

Dans les années 1980, la fiction historique a de nouveau fleuri dans l'espace culturel allemand tout comme ailleurs. Le présent mémoire analyse des formes postmodernes de la fiction historique en se basant sur trois romans historiques de langue allemande parus entre 1981 et 2005: *Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis* de Christoph Ransmayr, *Die Vermessung der Welt* de Daniel Kehlmann et *Marbot : Eine Biographie* de Wolfgang Hildesheimer. L'analyse s'appuie sur divers modèles de la fiction postmoderne, en particulier sur le schéma de catégorisation du roman historique élaboré par Ansgar Nünning. Le mémoire montre dans quelle mesure ces romans appliquent des moyens stylistiques typiques pour le postmodernisme et portent un regard critique ou comique sur l'histoire et la culture allemande et autrichienne.

Mots-clés : postmodernisme, parodie, littérature allemande, littérature autrichienne, roman historique, littérature et histoire, historiographie

Abstract

Postmodernism, an aesthetic movement that rejects modernist dogmas, emerged in the U.S.A. in the 1960s and became, over the last decades of the twentieth century, the paradigmatic aesthetic in architecture, literature and the arts. Postmodernism also created the conditions for a renaissance of the historical novel. However, the postmodern historical novel now constitutes a new form of the genre which confronts the dominant discourses with parody, irony and skepticism. This new form does not limit itself to narratives situated in a realist historical setting. Rather, it questions the validity and, consequently, the very nature of historical discourse, problematizing and often foregrounding the process of interpretation and reconstruction of the past. In this manner, contemporary historical fiction reflects current debates about the forms of historiography, debates triggered by the work of Hayden White.

The 1980s saw a renewed flowering of historical fiction in the German cultural space and elsewhere. This paper examines postmodern forms of historical fiction through an analysis of three postmodern historical novels in the German language published between 1981 and 2005: Christoph Ransmayr's *Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis*, Daniel Kehlmann's *Die Vermessung der Welt* and Wolfgang Hildesheimer's *Marbot: Eine Biographie*. The analysis is based upon various models of postmodern fiction, in particular Ansgar Nünning's five level categorization schema of the historical novel. This paper illustrates the extent to which these novels deploy postmodern stylistic devices and comment critically and comically upon German and Austrian history and culture.

Keywords : postmodernism, parody, German literature, Austrian literature, historical novel, literature and history, historiography

Zusammenfassung

Die Postmoderne, eine ästhetische Bewegung, die modernistische Dogmen ablehnte, entstand in den USA in den 1960er Jahren und wurde in den letzten Dekaden des 20. Jahrhunderts die paradigmatische Ästhetik in der Architektur, der Literatur und den Künsten. Die Postmoderne schuf ebenfalls die Voraussetzungen für eine Renaissance des historischen Romans. Jedoch stellt der postmoderne historische Roman eine ganz neue Form der Gattung dar, die herrschenden Diskursen parodistisch, ironisch und skeptisch begegnet. Es handelt sich nicht mehr um eine Erzählung mit einem realistischen historischen Rahmen. Diese neue Form historischer Fiktion stellt das Wesen des historischen Diskurses in Frage und rückt häufig den Vorgang der Sinngebung und die historische Rekonstruktion der Vergangenheit in den Vordergrund. Somit spiegelt diese postmoderne Literaturgattung gegenwärtige Debatten über die Formen der Geschichtsschreibung, wie sie von Hayden White angestoßen wurden.

In den 1980er Jahren setzte eine neue Blütezeit des historischen Romans auch im deutschen Kulturraum ein. Das Ziel meiner Arbeit ist, postmoderne Formen des historischen Romans zu untersuchen, und zwar durch eine Analyse dreier deutschsprachiger historischer Romane die zwischen 1981 und 2005 erschienen sind: Christoph Ransmayrs *Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis*, Daniel Kehlmanns *Die Vermessung der Welt* und Wolfgang Hildesheimers *Marbot: Eine Biographie*. Die Romane werden anhand verschiedener narratologischer Modelle analysiert, insbesondere des von Ansgar Nünning entwickelten fünfstufigen Modells des historischen Romans. Meine Arbeit veranschaulicht, in welcher Weise diese Romane postmoderne Stilmittel einsetzen und Geschichte und Kultur Deutschlands und Österreich auf kritische und komische Weise beleuchten.

Stichwörter : Postmoderne, Parodie, deutsche Literatur, österreichische Literatur, historischer Roman, Literatur und Geschichte, Geschichtsschreibung

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Abbreviations

For stylistic reasons, the following abbreviations are used for the novels of the corpus:

Schrecken = *Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis : Roman*

Vermessung = *Die Vermessung der Welt : Roman*

Marbot = *Marbot : Eine Biographie*

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Introduction

1. Corpus, aims and scope of the study

This paper examines postmodern forms of historical fiction through an analysis of three postmodern historical novels in the German language published between 1981 and 2005: Christoph Ransmayr's *Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis* (1984), Daniel Kehlmann's *Die Vermessung der Welt* (2005) and Wolfgang Hildesheimer's *Marbot: Eine Biographie* (1981). These works are different in content and structure but they share a common postmodern ethos and skeptical attitude towards historical discourse. That is, they problematize history, implicitly questioning what historical knowledge is and how the past may be reconstructed in the present. In so doing, all three deploy the postmodern strategy of breaking down the boundary between historical fiction and historiography as their narratives place fact, fiction, history and myth on the same ontological plane. This constitutes a major revision of the traditional forms of the historical novel.

The methodology pursued in this essay explores not only how the novels of the corpus manifest the aesthetic characteristics of postmodernism but also the manner in which they treat the relationship between fictional and historical discourse. The theoretical framework I apply makes use of three areas of study: the characteristics of postmodernism, the evolution of the historical novel culminating in its postmodern form and those theories of historiography which have had a significant influence on postmodernist fiction. The first chapter presents the theoretical basis of the essay, laying out in effect a model of postmodern historical fiction. One chapter is then devoted to an analysis of each novel according to the theoretical framework previously established. The reception and interpretation of each work is part of this analysis.

Moreover, I situate the works within the five-part analytical schema developed by Ansgar Nünning to categorize contemporary historical fiction. His categories go from the most straight-forward, traditional types to the most complex, self-reflexive postmodern forms the genre has to offer. I use Nünning's system of categories because they are the most complete available. In fact, I have also ordered the chapters of this study according to his categorization,

starting with the most complex example in the corpus, *Schrecken*, and ending with *Marbot*, which cannot be categorized according to his schema.

2. Framework of analysis

Postmodernism describes a body of concepts that achieved pre-eminence in the arts, architecture, literature and criticism during the closing decades of the 20th century. The term originated in the United States where it was used to describe a growing body of work in these fields that first rose to prominence in the 1960s and was characterized by a rejection of the dogmas of high modernism. Originally an aesthetic concept, postmodernism acquired philosophical and political meaning as well, becoming over time the paradigmatic cultural movement in the West. Literary critics began to describe and define postmodernism around 1970. Charles Jencks published *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* in 1977. Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, which appeared in 1988, is a codification of postmodern literature with special reference to the novel.

One of the principal features of postmodernist literature has been a return to historical themes as a literary subject. As a result, there has been a significant revival of historical fiction during this period. In fact, the historical novel has come to occupy a central role in contemporary literature and is considered by some critics to be the paradigmatic fictional genre of this epoch. Linda Hutcheon defines the quintessential form of the postmodern novel, one that reworks the forms and content of the past, as "historiographic metafiction."

The historical novel is now two centuries old and its postmodern form constitutes the most profound revision of its conventions to date. It is no longer merely a fictional narrative set in the "dark areas" of a realist historical situation. Its fictional aspects play the dominant role. The novels of the corpus, for example, present fictional biographies of historical figures. The stories narrated may be based upon reports which these figures have left behind, but they transform, i.e. fictionalize, the historical record in pursuit of narrative coherence. The novels are parodic in form and critical in intent.

Postmodern literature rejects the notion of "objective" historical narrative and calls attention to the discursive nature of historical writing. This questioning of history in fictional

discourse parallels and reflects debates in the field of historiography about the nature of historical narrative. These debates were triggered largely by the work of Hayden White who, in 1973, published his monograph *Metahistory*, which postulates that historical narrative shares many of the same formal properties as fictional discourse and is, in fact, based upon the tropes and archetypes of fiction. Although historical research focuses on a real-world referential field, the works which historians produce are in reality stories, i.e. they are emplotted as narrative, giving them a structure that does not exist as such in the historical record of events. In historical narratives, as in fiction, meaning inheres in the kind of story that is told as much as in the sequence of events.

White's ideas have been rejected by much of the historical establishment. However, they have been very influential in postmodernist theory which sees all discourse, including both fiction and history, as a human artifact subject to constant reinterpretation. Indeed, postmodernism presents itself as a process of constant revision as its authors revise both the content and the conventions of the fiction they create (McHale 1987, 90).

The idea that there are no absolutes in history and culture, that knowledge, criticism and interpretation are contextual, is a tenet of postmodernist thought which is by nature anti-ideological. Thus, postmodernism has often been attacked by conservatives and progressives alike as a philosophy of "anything goes." It is not, of course, a theory of the *avant garde*. Postmodern authors will take their material from any historical or cultural period, from high or low art, mythology or religion as long as it is appropriate to the narrative. They approach this material as skeptics, however, and their skepticism takes the form of irony in their novels.

3. A note on German language historical fiction

There is a sense that the postmodern movement was at first a phenomenon of English language culture. Later, works by such authors as Garcia Marquez and Calvino were redefined as postmodern (Barth 1980) but the Pop art and culture that emerged after the war reflecting the arrival of a new generation came from the US and Britain. America was the leader in creating popular literary and cinematographic forms, such as detective fiction and the Western, which have found their way into contemporary fiction. It was American critics who first identified and defined postmodernism. Following the US, there began to emerge in the late

1960s highly regarded British writers of historical fiction. It was in the late 1970s, when postmodernism “migrated” to Europe (Huysen 1986). Jean-François Lyotard published *La condition postmoderne* in 1979 and in 1980, Jürgen Habermas gave his Adorno-prize speech “Die Moderne - ein unvollendetes Projekt.” The latter is a critique of the postmodernist project as a new conservative aesthetic, a reflection of the debates on the nature of postmodernism that were taking place in Germany at that time. *Il nome della rosa* was published in 1980.

Therefore, it is not surprising to see a renewed flowering of historical fiction emerge in the German cultural space in the 1980s, including: Hildesheimer’s *Marbot* (1981), Nadolny’s *Die Entdeckung der Langsamkeit* (1983), Süskind’s *Parfum* (1985) and, from Ransmayr, both *Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis* (1984) and *Die Letzte Welt* (1988). *Die Vermessung der Welt* appeared two decades later but shares many of its postmodern features with these earlier works.

This thesis will illustrate the extent to which the novels of the corpus deploy the stylistic devices associated with postmodernism. As may be expected, they are complex, parodic reworkings of the genre of historical fiction. What is specific about them as German language historical novels is how they comment both critically and comically upon German and Austrian history and culture. The themes of each work are detailed in their respective chapters but there is an overlapping core of thematic content: a critique of the Enlightenment, Romanticism, overseas exploration and colonization, the collapse of empire.

1.4 Bibliography and sources

The bibliographical section listing the novels of the corpus shows two entries for *Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis*. This is because the first Brandstätter editions contain eight colour photographs of Arctic scenes by Rudi Palla that do not appear in later editions. On the other hand, these later editions contain a larger number of Payer’s etchings. I make reference to these modifications in chapter 2. Unless otherwise indicated, all references to *Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis* are to the 1996 Fischer edition.

I also note that the secondary sources listed in the bibliography are organized by subject. The first section is on postmodernism, the historical novel and historiography, followed by a separate section pertaining to each novel.

I have used secondary sources in German, English and French. Certain critics and theorists - Ansgar Nünning, Hayden White, Linda Hutcheon and Dorrit Cohn - have written extensively on the subjects under study, as evidenced by the multiple entries under their names. Often this reflects an evolution on the part of these scholars. Hutcheon's *A Theory of Parody*, for example, was expanded upon in her later *Poetics* but remains a valuable source in its own right. Hayden White's articles expand upon and, in my view, deepen the ideas he presented in *Metahistory*. All the novels in the corpus have also been amply commented upon by scholars and critics and I have endeavoured to present as complete a picture as possible of the different viewpoints informing the scholarly work on each one.

1. Postmodernism and the return to history: the postmodern historical novel

1.1 Postmodernism

Postmodernism is seen as a paradigm shift that grew out of sporadic attacks against the conventions of modernist art and literature and developed into a general critique that eventually achieved pre-eminence in cultural theory (Lützel 2005, 36). The transformation of art and literature in the United States that gave rise to postmodernism began as early as the late 1950s with the growing rebellion of a new generation of artists and writers against both the dominant canons and the custodians of high modernist culture (Huysen 1986, 188-189). Thus, when Leslie Fiedler's article "Cross the Border-Close the Gap" appeared in 1970, he was describing a phenomenon observed over the previous decade or so, the repudiation of classic modernism and the creation of a new aesthetic in fiction. The sense of newness and subversion inherent in postmodernism is amply represented by Fiedler's constitutive 1970 article, where he chides critics for not moving with the times and announces quite simply that modernism is dead. There is a feeling of exultation and liberation in all this: "all at once we are out of the Eliotic church, whose dogmas, delivered ex cathedra, two generations of students were expected to learn by heart" (Fiedler 1970, 273).¹ The function of the new postmodern novel is to close the gap between elite and mass culture, to be anti-art as well as anti-serious. In the name of this new phenomenon, Fiedler glorifies those popular narrative forms, such as the western, despised by critics but which created myths that formed the imagination of a generation (Eco 1988, 82).

There is also a sense that postmodernism's repudiation of the modernist project stems from the feeling that the latter had simply run its course. Looking back from 1980 on the phenomenon of which he was a part, John Barth comments that the reaction against the dominant modernist aesthetic of the first half of the 20th century is perfectly understandable "both because the modernist coinages are by now more or less debased common currency and

¹ Fiedler is not the only critic to refer to "the depressing pieties of the Cultural Religion of Modernism." Barth also castigates modernism for its priestly industry of mediators between text and readers (Barth 1980, 201).

because we really don't need more *Finnegans Wakes* and *Pisan Cantos*, each with its staff of tenured professors to explain it to us" (Barth 1980, 202). Modernism as a critique of 19th century bourgeois realism, with its artistic strategy of overturning the conventions of realism and its romantic insistence on the special role of the artist in society, had outlived the conditions which created it. It had particularly outlived its future-oriented sense of mission, the theory of the avant-garde, as it became ever more inaccessible to the postwar generation. Marked by an ever present popular culture, this generation rejected modernism's insular, aristocratic character and its difficult and unpopular canon.

At the same time, the rejection of modernism does not constitute a wholesale repudiation of its narrative devices.² Postmodern novelists continue to favour strategies such as the radical disruption of linear narrative flow, the dissolution of the conventional unity of event, character and plot in favour of an anecdotal structure, as well as ambiguity, self-mockery and the pursuit of subjectivity in opposition to so-called objective discourse - in short, the abandonment of naïve illusionism (Barth 1980, 199). Thus, postmodern writers could draw upon the forms and genres of popular culture and overlay them with modernist strategies (Huyssen 1986, 197).³ Still, the tone of postmodernism is quite different, giving far greater expression to the playful, ex-centric and ironic.⁴

Parody, in particular, plays a key role in postmodern fiction where it acts as a privileged carrier of self-reflexivity. Postmodern parody is imitation with critical difference, at once skeptical and distanced, allowing the artist to speak ironically to a discourse from within it (Hutcheon 1988, 35).⁵ In so doing, postmodernism rejects modernist views of tradition and history. It reflects neither contempt for the past nor a desire to perpetuate traditions. Barth talks of an effort to transcend and synthesize "pre-modernist and modernist modes of writing"

² Huyssen speaks of a core modernist aesthetic that dominated literature, music, architecture and the visual arts for decades. He constructs "an ideal type" of modernist art which includes the following: the autonomy of art and its separation from life; the notion of art as an encounter with its medium; the rejection of realist representation and verisimilitude and the effacement of content; its adversarial stance towards mass culture (Huyssen 1986, 53-54).

³ Hutcheon calls this a paradox of postmodernism which, while rejecting many aspects of modernist dogma, clearly also developed out of certain key modernist strategies (*Poetics*, 43).

⁴ "Ex-centric" is Hutcheon's term for the views of those who are or have been marginalized by the dominant discourses.

⁵ See also the definition in her earlier *A Theory of Parody*, pp. 36-37.

while maintaining the high artistic values found in both (Barth 1980, 203). Although postmodernism may embrace textual and cultural artifacts from all periods as possible material, it contemplates the past through irony. Eliot's allusions and citations in *The Waste Land*, Hutcheon notes, constituted a search for the continuity of tradition. This is contested in postmodern parody, "where it is often ironic discontinuity that is revealed at the heart of continuity, difference at the heart of similarity" (Hutcheon 1988, 11).⁶

Mainly an aesthetic movement at its inception, postmodernism's crystallization into a broadly based cultural phenomenon generated philosophical and political analysis as well. The success of the postmodern paradigm in a wide variety of artistic endeavours also generated considerable discussion as to whether it should be viewed as a forward or backward looking phenomenon, i.e. progressive or conservative. Most will agree that it represents a repudiation of many aspects of the modernist project, but while a critic like Fiedler welcomes this without reserve, others, like Fredric Jameson, are highly critical. Criticism of the culture of postmodernism speaks generally to its political meaning and emanates mainly from those who view modernism as a progressive project and for whom the postmodernist skepticism of their meta-narratives (Lyotard's formulation) is a step backwards.⁷ Although these issues go beyond the scope of this essay, I would note that postmodernism has always had a subversive aura about it, in the sense of a broadly based popular culture deeply skeptical of the established norms of the elite, more the product of the postwar baby boom than any historic avant-garde. To some extent, the notion of subversion and anti-elitism persists, as we shall see with *Vermessung*. The postmodern period has also seen the emergence of new discourses of contestation, for example, from feminist and post-colonialist movements and critics. These discourses are socially and culturally ex-centric, giving voice to people and groups formerly excluded from the political mainstream and revising mainstream views of history. They may have evolved in parallel with rather than because of aesthetic postmodernism but they have been absorbed into postmodernist culture. Thus, the postmodern historical novel has given

⁶ "Nicht Nachahmung, Anlehnung, Affirmation, Fortsetzung, sondern Begriffe wie Korrektur, Palinodie, Zurücknahme, Dekomposition und Parodie bezeichnen ... das postmoderne Verhältnis zur Tradition." (Lützel 2005, 47)

⁷ See, for example, Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," 1984.

voice to revisionist discourses, defining one of the categories of historical fiction I shall use in this study.⁸

Postmodernism in art, architecture and literature had developed to such an extent by the mid-1980's - including the emergence of prize-winning and highly acclaimed novelists such as García Márquez, Eco, Doctorow and Rushdie - that Linda Hutcheon could attempt an overall description of its poetics in her *A Poetics of Postmodernism* published in 1988 (referred to as *Poetics*). Although the main field of interest of Hutcheon's *Poetics* is the novel, she develops her argumentation based upon the aesthetics of postmodern architecture and applies the concepts derived therefrom to literature. She revisits the familiar paradoxes of postmodernism, e.g. the manner in which it uses and abuses the conventions of realism and modernism and its appeal to popular audiences all the while using sophisticated parodic and metafictional forms.⁹ Of fundamental importance is her investigation of the role of narrative in postmodern novels, the manner in which these novels problematize narrative as they invoke it, a reflection subsumed in her concept of historiographic metafiction. This concept refers, on the one hand, to a specific form of novel, "those well-known and popular novels which are both intensively self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages."¹⁰ On the other, it constitutes an overall approach to understanding postmodern history, fiction and theory.

Postmodernist theory recognizes "the inevitable textuality of our knowledge of the past" as it pertains to both history and literature and the "inescapably discursive form of that knowledge" (Hutcheon, 1988, 127-128). Meaning does not reside in historical events but in the systems of signification that transform past events into facts.¹¹ Thus, the postmodernist novel rejects the pretense of simple mimesis and, through parody and ironic play with the traces of the past, foregrounds the discursive act of constructing reality (ibid., 40). For the

⁸ For an analysis of the evolution of these discourses and their importance in the context of postmodernism see Nünning (2004) and Lützel (2005).

⁹ "Postmodernism is both academic and popular, élitist and accessible." (*Poetics*, 44)

¹⁰ Hutcheon 1988, 5. *The French Lieutenant's Woman, Midnight's Children and Ragtime* lead the list of examples given.

¹¹ "The postmodern, then, effects two simultaneous moves. It reinstalls historical contexts as significant and even determining, but in so doing, it problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge." (Hutcheon 1988, 89)

postmodern novelist, history, like fiction or myth, is merely another *text* upon which he or she can draw. The implication is that postmodern novels not only cross aesthetic borders, such as that between entertainment and art, but also test the ontological borders between the real and the mythical, between history and fiction (Lützel 2005, 47-48). These issues are treated in all the novels comprising the corpus, as will become apparent in the following chapters.

1.2 Historical writing as narrative

Realist historiography, the counterpoint in historical studies to literary realism and one of the constituent elements of the historical novel, uses narrative discourse as its principal form. However, the use of narrative as a basis for what is called the science of history has been contested in various fields of study, from analytic philosophy to semiotic literary theory (White 1984, 7). The rethinking of the nature of historical narrative is a phenomenon of the postmodern period and is relevant to an understanding of postmodern historical fiction. It is most closely associated with the work of Hayden White, whose influential monograph *Metahistory* (1973) represents his first significant work on the subject of historical narrative and the relationship between historical and fictional discourse. His theories are particularly controversial among professional historians but have become influential among theorists of postmodernism, such as Linda Hutcheon, who refer extensively to his work.¹²

Metahistory is a major study of the evolution of historical writing in the 19th century, based upon an analysis of the work of its major practitioners from the point of view of narrative theory. White analyses various modes of realist historiography from Michelet to Burckhardt and contrasts them to the philosophers of history - Marx, Nietzsche and Croce - who repudiated realist historiography later in the century. At the heart of his analysis is a

¹² White often refers to the work of Hutcheon and her theory of historiographic metafiction in support of his own ideas. The strongest opposition to his work is found among those professional historians of the so-called “objective” school who view the transformation of historical evidence (i.e. “facts”) into narrative representation as the heart of historical science. The term “objective historiography” is meant, amongst other things, to distinguish it from historical writing based on various meta-narratives. Practitioners of objective historiography are particularly opposed to any notion of relativism - the reevaluation of the historical record according to changes in prevailing ideology - and to the principle of “anything goes”, which is very much a characteristic of postmodern fiction. For a defence of objective historiography and its attendant critique of postmodernist thought see Gertrude Himmelfarb, “Telling it as you like it: postmodern history and the flight from fact” in Jenkins (1997).

“tropological” theory of historical writing. That is, he describes historical narratives as being essentially stories constructed according to the principles of fictional narrative, where the generation of meaning is achieved through a process of emplotment, a formal explanatory strategy found in fictional discourse. Relying heavily on the work of Northrop Frye, White identifies four archetypal plot structures consistently used in historical narrative: romance, comedy, tragedy and satire. He also asserts that historical discourse uses the same figurative devices that fiction uses: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony. Emplotment and figuration, in the context of the political and philosophical viewpoints of each historian, combine in various ways to create their individual styles.¹³ According to White’s analysis, historical narrative is essentially literary in form and fictional in the manner of its construction.

Traditional historians see narrative as a “higher” form of historiography as compared to mere chronicles. A chronicle does not tell a story *per se*. It begins *in media res* and then at some point stops. Nor does history, the continuous process of human activity, present itself in story form; that is, it does not appear in the historical record already emplotted. This is the role of narrativization, which selects events from the chronicle as “facts” and imposes a discursive form on them, encoding them as stories according to the story types found in a given culture. Applying figurative concepts to historical events and transforming them into patterns of meaning is the central aspect of narrativization. This model of discourse sees narrative as an “apparatus for the *production of meaning*” rather than merely a vehicle for transmitting information. The reader comprehends the “meaning” of the discourse through recognition of the form of the narrative (White 1984, 19-20). At the same time, the illusion of objectivity is maintained because emplotment creates the perception that meaning inheres within events. This is a paradox of historical narrative, that a form of discourse, originally developed as fiction, becomes for historical science the sign and proof of reality.¹⁴

¹³ The introductory section of *Metahistory* establishes the theoretical foundation of the work as a whole. In the years since the publication of *Metahistory*, White has published numerous articles which recapitulate and extend the ideas set out in the monograph. My sense is that over time his focus has moved progressively to the area of literary theory and figural language.

¹⁴ Robert Berkhofer Jr. observes that the historian’s job is to make it appear as though the structure of factuality had determined the organizational structure of the narrative. Robert Berkhofer Jr., “The Challenge of Poetics to Normal Historical Practice,” in Jenkins (1997), 147. The point is also made by

“A narrative account is always a figurative account, an allegory” (White 1984, 24). This dictum has considerable resonance for postmodern literature, where the crossing of generic and discursive boundaries is a persistent feature. It raises the question of the relationship between the real and the imaginary which is constantly problematized in postmodern fiction. It is also picked up by theorists like Ansgar Nünning, who analyze the manner in which postmodern historical novels cross the border between history and fiction.

The criticism of postmodernism leveled by professional historians turns on its presumed rejection of the fixity of texts and, by extension, the impossibility of discerning any objective truth about the past.¹⁵ Now we can see the significance of the notion of textualism inherent in the concept of historiographic metafiction. Indeed, postmodernist textualism sees reality as essentially a discursive construct created in the process of narrativization. Moreover, postmodernism is well aware of its own constructed nature and makes it the subject of its discourse. Therefore, postmodernist theories of history and of literature both point to the transcendence of distinctions which have been long-held dogmas supporting the illusions of narrative, such as the distinctions between documents and literary texts, between the referent and the subject of a discourse, between fact and fiction and between history and literature (White 1997, 200-203). All this has implications for the historical novel.

1.3 The historical novel and the dichotomy of fact and fiction

Both literary realism and historicism, the belief that social and cultural phenomena are determined by history, emerged out of the Romantic movement in the second quarter of the nineteenth-century.¹⁶ By that time, the historical novel had already made its appearance with the publication in 1814 of Scott's *Waverly or, 'Tis Sixty Years Since*, generally considered the first historical novel as such (Aust 1994, 68). That Scott believed he was creating something

Roland Barthes in his 1967 article, “Le discours de l’histoire,” where he uses semiotic theory to explain the manner in which historical discourse creates the illusion that it is the events that speak for themselves.

¹⁵ “... post-modernism amounts to a denial of the fixity of any “text,” of the authority of the author over the interpreter, of any “canon” that “privileges” great books over comic strips ... In history it is the denial of any fixity of the past, of the reality of the past apart from what the historian chooses to make of it, and thus of any objective truth about the past.” (Gertrude Himmelfarb, op. cit.)

¹⁶ “Romanticism, historicism and realism: toward a period concept for early nineteenth-century intellectual history,” in White 2010, 68.

new is made clear in the introduction to *Waverly*, where he tells the reader that his novel will not be like the usual works that use historical themes: stories of chivalry, Gothic or German romances, sentimental tales and the like. The original prototype of the genre combined an imaginary tale of Romance with “real” historical events, endowing the former with the aura of reality and the latter with the power and intimacy of fiction (White 1996, 18). For the model to be successful, the reader must be comfortable with and capable of distinguishing between the realms of fact and fiction. According to Dorrit Cohn, a defining characteristic of historical fiction as compared to other novelistic genres is “the peculiar response of the reader who identifies a work *as* a historical novel” (Cohn 1999b, 158).

The combination of historical and fictional discourses, which are normally assumed to be differentiated by their subject matter, was a novelty. Scott’s novels garnered considerable acclaim and generated the production of other works in the new genre. Alfred de Vigny’s *Cinq-Mars*, for example, appeared in 1826, and Alessandro Manzoni’s *I promessi sposi* in 1827. These authors were already extending the boundaries of the genre, creating works that reflected differing visions of the portrayal of historical themes in a fictional context and commenting upon their own work.¹⁷ De Vigny published *Cinq-Mars* with a preface entitled *Sur la vérité dans l’art* in which he explains how his novel differs from the English model. In 1830, Manzoni published a lengthy article on the subject of historical fiction.¹⁸ Even in its earliest days, the historical novel appears as a genre capable of sustaining multiple forms.

The combination of history and fiction has proven popular but has also given rise to a criticism that has long dogged the genre: that it is a hybrid form belonging to neither fiction nor historiography. A commonly held opinion asserts the innate triviality of the genre, viewing it as romantic escapism lacking in aesthetic autonomy and undermined by didactic intentions and calculated entertainment effects (Müller 1991, 60). Hermann Broch associated historical novels with kitsch (Müller 1991, 59) and Henry James famously wrote, “The ‘historic’ novel is, for me, condemned ... to a fatal *cheapness*,” referring to the “abysmal public *naiveté*” in

¹⁷Geppert discusses the works by Manzoni and de Vigny in Geppert (2009), 40-49.

¹⁸ Alessandro Manzoni. *Del romanzo storico e, in genere, de’ componimenti misti di storia e d’invenzione*. Translated into English by Sandra Bermann as: *On the Historical Novel and, in General, on Works Mixing History and Invention*. Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1984. Print.

respect of the genre.¹⁹ Nevertheless, writers continued to produce historical novels in the romantic, realist, modernist and postmodernist modes.

The issue of the boundary between fiction and history - and which of the two should have priority - has vexed writers and critics of the genre from the beginning. Until the advent of postmodernism, two models of historical fiction could be identified (Roberts 1991b, 10). One signifies the primacy of history, a normative model positing a continuum of fiction and history within the narrative. This type of novel adheres in a general sense to the historiographic realism developed in nineteenth-century Europe. The other type signifies the primacy of fiction and is essentially a model foregrounding the discontinuity between history and fiction within the narrative, what Geppert's termed the productive hiatus between history and fiction (Geppert 1976). These two types represent incompatible visions of mimesis. The history of the historical novel is one of increased complexity in form and ambiguity in content, a shift away from the early normative model towards the ever-increasing primacy of fiction (Roberts 1991a, 51).

A narrative space populated with both real and fictive characters creates ontological issues. In Scott's novels, world historic figures are kept at a distance and viewed only through the eyes of the fictional protagonists in such a manner that the real and fictive spheres do not interfere with one another. There is enough space in the so-called dark areas of history to accommodate characters such as Waverly, whose role is to illustrate the social and political history of the period. Fiction structured in this manner is likely to be didactic, presenting historical "facts" clothed in a fictional narrative.²⁰

In *War and Peace*, on the other hand, Tolstoy significantly modifies the original model and fills the dark areas of history with intimate, fictionalized representations of historical figures, from General Kutuzov's private conversations to Napoleon's thoughts on the field of Borodino as he realizes that the battle has not gone in his favour (Cohn 1999b, 154-155). Tolstoy's technique is to bring the reader close to these historical figures, who are

¹⁹ In a letter to Sarah Orne Jewett, October 5, 1901, in Henry James, *Letters: Volume 4, 1895-1916*. Ed. Leon Edel. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984. Print

²⁰ Lukács analyzes the historical novel from this didactic point of view, for example, praising Scott for his treatment of the downfall of the clans in Scotland and condemning German liberal authors of historical fiction after 1848 for the *rapprochement* with absolutism as shown by their work.

fictionalized in important ways. His goal in *War and Peace* is to represent philosophical views on the role of the individual in history and his narrative approach shifts the focus to the fictional aspect of the historical novel in pursuit of that goal.²¹ The novel ends with a long epilogue dealing with his views on history, so that the story takes on retrospectively the character of the proof of his ideas, a proof presented as a fictional narrative. For Dorrit Cohn, this manner of rendering historical events refutes the criticism that the genre is a hybrid form (Cohn 1999b, 153).

Modernism, in its programmatic campaign to deconstruct nineteenth-century realism, transforms the historical novel no less than other literary forms, stripping it of the illusions of realism common to naïve storytelling. It gives precedence to the genre's fictional aspects. This is how we should understand Döblin's phrase, "Der historische Roman ist erstens Roman und zweitens keine Historie" (Döblin 1963, 170-171), a reaction against what he considered the tendency of the genre to slip into an unwarranted *Mischgattung*, a problem often found in biographies. Foregrounding a generally complex narrative style, modernist historical novels break with the realist, chronologically ordered narrative commonly associated with older forms of historical fiction. In his discussion of the modernist historical novel, Geppert singles out *Wallenstein*, *Absalom, Absalom!* and *La semaine sainte* as paradigmatic.

Postmodernism, as we have seen, is characterized by a return to history as a central theme and source of artistic raw material. It is in this period that the creators of historical fiction effect the most profound changes in the genre, which now occupies a much more central role than before. In art, theory and criticism, postmodernism reevaluates the nature of narrative and redefines both history and fiction as discursive cultural artifacts. Its questioning of the strict distinction between history and fiction, which realist historiography had taken for granted, has had a profound effect on historical fiction.²² The evolution which the genre has undergone

²¹ "The techniques employed by Tolstoy in (the Borodino) episode from *War and Peace* reflect his conviction that the fictional narration of historical events from the perspective of persons *involved* in these events comes closer to the truth than any historical narrative." (Cohn 1999b, 150-151). See also Hayden White, "Against Historical Realism: A Reading of *War and Peace*", where he puts forward the view that the novel "undermines Western European literary realism by questioning the ideology of history on which it was based." *New Left Review*, 46, July/August 2007, 89. Web.

²² "diese Einsichten haben fest etablierte begriffliche Gegensätze wie „Realität versus Fiktion“ oder „Literatur versus Geschichtsschreibung“ in den vergangenen Dekaden gehörig ins Wanken gebracht

becomes clear by comparing the traditional model of an imaginary tale of romance in an historical setting with historiographic metafiction, where the real and the imaginary are presented as if they were of the same ontological order. If it does not entirely erase the fact/fiction dichotomy, postmodernism at least uses it as a source of creative innovation.

1.4 Characteristics and categorization of the postmodern historical novel

It is clear that the historical novel has now become a dominant genre of postmodern writing, a position shared with other forms of popular writing such as science fiction, action, ghost stories and so on (White 2009, 876). Ansgar Nünning points to a paradigmatic shift towards historical fiction in postmodernism, noting the significant number of historical novels which won the Booker Prize since 1969 (10 at the time he wrote the article; see Nünning 1997, 217). He also confirms the capacity of postmodernism to cross discursive borders in the pursuit of a new literary model: “The crossing of boundaries between fact and fiction, history and myth, historiography and historical fiction, individual stories and collective history has become one of the hallmarks of postmodernist historical novels” (ibid.). As orthodox historiography was being challenged by a rethinking of the nature of historical narrative, historical fiction began more and more to be located on the border between historiography and literature.

The characteristics of postmodern historical novels conform to the general description of postmodernism which we have already seen, where parody and irony constitute essential devices.²³ Parody is the primary carrier of postmodernism’s ubiquitous double coding and has become a complex metafictional and comic device. It can undermine conventional distinctions between art and reality and helps to achieve the synthesis with older literary forms which John Barth presented as his vision of postmodern fiction (Nünning 1999, 132-133). Nünning lists the following now familiar stylistic elements characteristic of postmodern historical fiction: fragmentation, discontinuity, indeterminacy, plurality, metafictionality, heterogeneity,

und zu einer Reihe neuer Formen historischer Romane geführt, die diesen Tendenzen Rechnung tragen.” (Heizmann, 1)

²³ See Nünning (1999).

intertextuality, decentering, dislocation and playfulness, as well as a “very strong element of self-consciousness and reflexivity” (Nünning 1997, 218).²⁴

Irony has developed into a persistent trope of postmodernist historical literature. In *Metahistory*, White notes the tendency of historical narrative to evolve towards the ironic mode. “Against these three tropes (i.e. Metaphor, Metonymy, Synecdoche), which I characterize as ‘naïve’ (since they can be deployed only in the belief in language’s capacity to grasp the nature of things in figurative terms), the trope of Irony stands as a ‘sentimental’ (in Schiller’s sense of ‘self-conscious’) counterpart.” Irony is “the linguistic protocol in which skepticism in thought and relativism in ethics are conventionally expressed” and its use presupposes an audience capable of understanding it (White 1973, 37-38). Skepticism and relativism are characteristic of postmodern thought, which remains fundamentally skeptical of naïve formulations. Consequently, postmodern historical novels tend towards the ironic mode in their formulation of history and the three novels of the corpus are no exception.

This essay will use in its analyses the categorization of historical novels proposed by Ansgar Nünning.²⁵ Hutcheon coined the term “historiographic metafiction” in an effort to subsume under one name the dominant mode of postmodern writing, namely works which focus upon and problematize the limits of historical knowledge. Such novels remind the reader that history, even as a collective process, is only accessible as narrative discourse produced by people who interpret events from their particular points of view (Nünning 1997, 227). Nünning is critical, however, of the way in which the concept of historiographic metafiction creates one all-encompassing definition. It leads, in his view, to unwarranted assumptions of homogeneity and fails to recognize the diversity and scope of innovation in postmodern historical fiction.

His categorization nuances the various kinds of contemporary historical fiction along a

²⁴ This article has as its theme the British historical novel but the same list of characteristics could easily be transposed to the German context. Lützeler (2004) and Hoesterey (1997) provide useful summaries of the characteristics of German language postmodern novels.

²⁵ A detailed exposition of his categorization of the historical novel is found in Nünning’s 1995 study *Von historischer Fiktion zu historischer Metafiktion*, listed in the bibliography, in particular sections 3.2 and 3.3 containing his criteria of selection and typology and an analytic description of the five categories of historical novel, pp. 219-291. Summaries of his categories of historical fiction may also be found in various articles such as Nünning 1997 and 2004.

continuum from the most traditional to the most innovative postmodern form, which he also calls historiographic metafiction. Nünning's categories are useful not only because they are nuanced but also because of the schema of narratological criteria he applies. I will limit myself necessarily to a brief summary.

Nünning first presents an extensive list of selection criteria which create a comprehensive basis of analysis. The kinds of questions he asks have to do with such narrative elements as whether the novel in question is hetero- or auto-referential, whether fictionality or external reality dominates, whether the novel focuses on historical events or on historiography and historical theory, what mode of emplotment dominates, whether the novel has didactic functions, and so on. From these criteria he defines five forms of historical fiction, the first two of which do not demonstrate characteristics of postmodernism.

Documentary historical novels (*dokumentarische historische Romane*), or fiction presented as historical writing, tend to foreground the factual world and thereby allow the external reality of historical referents to dominate. On the other hand, **realist historical novels** (*realistische historische Romane*), also referred to as traditionalist, foreground a fictitious plot against an identifiable historical background and maintain a certain balance between fictional elements and extra-textual reality. Both types are oriented towards the historical past and adopt a linear-chronological ordering of events.

Revisionist historical novels (*revisionistische historische Romane*) rewrite history but do not necessarily break the "aesthetic illusion" of narrative. They foreground the text's fictionality vis-à-vis extra-textual reality. Revisionist historical fiction is inspired by the desire to rewrite history from the point of view of those who do not find their place in traditional historiography and such novels may use character-focalizers to project the views of those who have not had a voice in mainstream historical discourse. They are consequently oriented towards the present, supporting ideologies of contestation. These novels may also feature grotesque or ironic depictions of history as satire.

Metahistorical novels (*metahistorische Romane*) constitute a "significant innovation in the treatment of history as a literary theme because what they highlight is the process of historical reconstruction and the protagonists' consciousness of the past rather than a

represented historical world as such.” These novels are generally set in the present and explore how characters endeavour to come to terms with the past, foregrounding the problematics of the appropriation and transmission of history. Highly self-referential, they feature a non-chronological ordering of the narrative and a mainly ironic representation of history as an object of reconstruction.

As in Hutcheon’s definition, **historiographic metafiction** (historiographische Metafiktion) is historical fiction which both thematizes and undermines the border between fiction and historiography, thereby problematizing the epistemological status of the latter. It may be explicit, using narrators or characters directly to explore these issues. It may also be implicit, using devices such as polyphony, a fragmentary structure or the montage of texts to draw attention to the unreliability of historical discourse. As with postmodernist discourse in general, both historiographic metafiction and metahistorical novels are illusion breaking, “sentimental” forms of fiction.

The three novels in the corpus represent three different types of historical fiction according to Nünning’s categorization. *Schrecken* and *Vermessung* may be classified respectively as metahistorical and revisionist historical fiction. *Marbot*, however, breaks generic boundaries and cannot be placed within any of the above categories. In the following pages, I will present a detailed description of each work as historical fiction.

2. Christoph Ransmayr, *Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis: Roman*

2.1 Origin and reception of the novel

In May 2014, Christoph Ransmayr spoke at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach on the occasion of the opening of an exhibition of travel photography by authors and he used the platform to recount how he came to write *Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis*.²⁶ The publishing house of Christian Brandstätter had offered him the mandate to write descriptive texts to accompany a pictorial exhibition on the Austro-Hungarian North Pole Expedition of 1872-1874. He researched the historical background and decided that he could not, in the context of that show, produce something which would meaningfully represent the endeavours of the participants in the expedition but that he could turn it into his own story. Brandstätter accepted the project and, according to Ransmayr, it then took some five years and considerable work to complete the novel.²⁷

Ransmayr did not travel to the Arctic prior to writing *Schrecken*. His Marbach photograph was taken in 2003 when, at the invitation of Reinhold Messner, he made his first trip to the region, a cruise on a Russian icebreaker to Franz Joseph Land in honour of the 130th anniversary of its discovery.²⁸ His research for the novel was based on historical source material and discussions with people who had travelled to the Arctic. These sources are listed on the page *Hinweis (Schrecken, 277)*, where Ransmayr also thanks a series of his friends “für die langen Gespräche über das Eis.” The list includes “Rudi,” who is undoubtedly Rudi Palla with whom Ransmayr worked on two articles about Franz Joseph Land and the Spitzbergens

²⁶ Christoph Ransmayr im Deutschen Literaturarchiv Marbach: Ein Gespräch zur Ausstellungseröffnung ‘Reisen. Fotos von Unterwegs.’ Web. January 2015. On exhibit were a few of Ransmayr’s own photographs, including one of Franz Joseph Land.

²⁷ Ransmayr’s anecdote confirms other accounts of the origins of *Schrecken*: e.g. Lamb-Faffelberger 2001, 270 and Sigrid Löffler in her article, “Neue Bezauberung” in *Profil*, 39/1988, Vienna, cited in Kovář 1991, 98.

²⁸ This trip is the subject of the chapter *Zweiter Geburtstag* in his book *Atlas eines ängtlichen Mannes*, where he writes, “Ich war zur Polarfahrt an Bord der Kapitan Dranitsyn eingeladen worden, weil ich fast zwanzig Jahre zuvor einen Roman über die Entdeckung des Franz-Joseph-Landes geschrieben hatte - allerdings ohne je in der Arktis gewesen zu sein.” (Ransmayr 2012, 271.)

prior to publishing *Schrecken*.²⁹ The first Christian Brandstätter edition of *Schrecken* also included eight colour photographs by Rudi Palla, although these were removed from the subsequent Fischer editions.

Published in 1984, *Schrecken* is Christoph Ransmayr's first novel. He has since achieved the status of one of the most important contemporary German language authors, referred to as "the new superstar of the German/Austrian literary scene," whose success suggests, "that the author has indeed touched the nerve of our times."³⁰ His success, however, was not brought about by *Schrecken*. Ransmayr's literary breakthrough came with the 1988 publication of his second novel, *Die letzte Welt*, which by February 1989 was into its eighth edition with around 150,000 copies sold. The inclusion of this later novel in the *Oldenbourg Interpretationen* in 1991 further enhanced Ransmayr's reputation. Since 1988, he has been the recipient of over a dozen literary awards.

In fact, Ransmayr was already well known in literary circles before the publication of *Die Letzte Welt*. A *Spiegel* review of that novel notes "daß Christoph Ransmayr ein Günstling der Kritiker schon war, als er vor vier Jahren debütierte: mit dem Roman *Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis*" and quotes from a number of positive newspaper reviews of the earlier book.³¹ One of these was a lengthy review by the author Klaus Modick also published in *Der Spiegel* in 1985. Modick analyses *Schrecken* as an adventure novel that debunks the drive of exploration as a senseless pursuit of personal fame. His review is very complimentary of Ransmayr's work. Like Mazzini, who disappears in the ice, "so verschwindet der Leser im Text: Aus „Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis“, dem über 100 Jahre alten Abenteuer, wird ein Leseabenteuer" (Modick 1985, 189).

²⁹ Christoph Ransmayr (1982), "Des Kaisers kalte Länder. Kreuzfahrten auf der Route der k. k. österreichisch-ungarischen Nordpolexpedition. Mit Fotos von Rudi Palla," (parts I and II in *Extrablatt* 3 and 4, pages 16-25 and 60-63 respectively); and Christoph Ransmayr, Rudi Palla (1983), "Der letzte Mensch," *TransAtlantik*, 6, 65-74, reprinted in Uwe Wittstock (ed.), *Die Erfindung der Wirklichkeit*, 45-69. These articles are also referred to in Peter 2013, 114-115.

³⁰ Lamb-Faffelberger 2001, 269-270. This article, as well as those of Scheck 1994, and Kovář 1991, present information about Ransmayr's success and the reception of his various novels.

³¹ Harald Wieser 1988. "Eine Flaschenpost aus der Antike." *Der Spiegel*, Nr. 37, 226. Web. December 2014.

Ransmayr was a recipient of the Elias-Canetti-Stipendium in 1986-1988, while he was writing *Die Letzte Welt*, another indication of the esteem in which he was already held. Nevertheless, his standing in literary circles did not translate into meaningful success with the reading public. *Schrecken* made commercial headway only after the success of his second novel and has since gone through a number of editions. It is worth noting that *The Last World*, the English translation of *Die Letzte Welt*, was published by Grove Press in 1990, whereas *The Terrors of Ice and Darkness*, the translation of the earlier *Schrecken*, was published by the same company only a year later in 1991. John E. Woods translated both novels. It was at the beginning of the 1990's that the academic world began to give "serious attention" to the body of Ransmayr's work including *Schrecken* (Lamb-Faffelberger 2001, 269).

2.2 Preliminary matters: analytic framework

Schrecken is an historical novel whose core narrative presents a reconstruction of the 1872-1874 Polar voyage of the Austro-Hungarian ship *Tegetthoff*.³² It was a minor historical event. Yet, the popular imagination is fired by such stories of adventure and exploration. The miraculous return of men all but given up for lost created a sensation at the time and their voyage home was like a heroic procession. The story of the expedition is well documented, providing ready source material for writers and historians. Logs, letters and diaries from the expedition are preserved in the *Österreichischen Kriegsarchiv/Marineabteilung*. Both Weyprecht and Payer subsequently spoke and published reports about the voyage and diaries of other crewmembers, including Krisch, were also published. It is Payer's book, however, that provides the key source and intertextual voice used by Ransmayr in the narrative.³³ In fact, the novel's trigger event is the discovery by the fictional Josef Mazzini of Payer's

³² The "Österreichisch-Ungarische Nordpol-Expedition 1872-1874" was led by two career officers in the Austrian military: Linienschiffslieutenant Carl Weyprecht acted as commander aboard the *Tegetthoff* and Oberlieutenant Julius Payer, a cartographer, acted as commander on land. Within weeks of setting off from the Norwegian port of Tromsø, the *Tegetthoff* became locked in the northward drifting pack ice of the Arctic Sea and remained icebound for two years. While drifting with the pack ice, the ship came upon an as yet undiscovered archipelago, a near lifeless series of islands covered by glaciers, which they named Franz Joseph Land. In May 1874, the crew abandoned its icebound vessel and walked and rowed towards Russian territory, where they were rescued by a whaling ship. The expedition suffered one fatality, the machinst Otto Krisch.

³³ The original version of Julius Payer's 1876 report is available both in print and online as an ebook.

account of the voyage, which the narrator describes as a dramatic, bizarre and implausible story. The events leading to Mazzini's eventual disappearance in the Spitzbergens begin

“als er unter den antiquarischen Beständen der Buchhandlung Koreth die mehr als hundert Jahre alte Beschreibung einer Eismeerfahrt entdeckte, die so dramatisch, so bizarr und am Ende so unwahrscheinlich war wie sonst nur eine Phantasie: Es war der Bericht Julius Ritter von Payers über die *k. u. k. österreichisch-ungarische Nordpolexpedition*, erschienen in Wien 1876 beim Hof- und Universitätsbuchhändler Alfred Hölder.” (*Schrecken*, 23)³⁴

Schrecken is a complex novel. Structured anachronistically, it contains a series of interwoven narratives and uses a significant number of discursive forms and intertextual references, all of which contribute to the richness and complexity of the text.³⁵ There is a wealth of thematic content: the history of Polar exploration and its heroism, hubris and tragedy; the expansion and also the end of empire; the dichotomy of the Enlightenment and Romanticism; *Sozial-* and *Zivilisationskritik*; and the nature of adventure in conditions of modernity. The novel makes extensive use of the metaphorical *topoi* of space and mythology. The semantic space, in particular the trope of the empty and inhospitable Arctic landscape, can carry any number of connotations: the Enlightenment impulse to conquer nature, the blank page to be filled by creation, the sublime beauty of the harsh landscape and so on. In this manner, the novel seems to invite interpretation through aesthetic categories and metaphor.

This varied thematic and metaphoric content has led to a multiplicity of interpretations. I read *Schrecken* to be essentially metonymic rather than metaphorical. It is postmodern, ironic and metafictional. Through various devices, it questions the validity of historical sources, including the sources it uses, and yet achieves the reconstruction of historical events in a dramatic and often moving manner. By virtue of the story structure, *Schrecken* is best

³⁴ Julius Payer's book on the expedition contains numerous illustrations, many of which are based on drawing he made while the ship was frozen in the pack ice. *Schrecken* reproduces 23 of these illustrations in the later Fischer editions as opposed to 11 in the original Brandstätter edition. Julius Payer is almost certainly one of the sources of the novel's title, which reflects the drama of the expedition as brought out of the historical record by Ransmayr's narrative. In Payer's 1881 obituary for Weyprecht we find the line: "Im Winter 1872/73 litt die Besatzung des „Tegetthoff“ unter den Schrecken der Eispressungen" (Payer 1881, 1).

³⁵ The various discursive layers include: citations from the diaries and reports of expedition participants (identified by their cursive script); excursions on the history of Polar exploration; photographs, biographies and etchings; information for tourists visiting the Spitzbergens; quotations from Petrarch and, most particularly, from the Book of Job.

analyzed and understood as a particular type of historical fiction, namely a “metahistorical novel.” These various elements constitute the analytic framework to be followed in this chapter and will be presented in the following order: the historical reconstruction of the Weyprecht-Payer expedition as metonymy, *Schrecken* as a metahistorical and postmodern novel and Ransmayr’s poetics as represented in this work.

2.3 On story, narration and the novel as metonymy

2.3.1 Story structure and narrative layers

Schrecken presents a fairly simple story told in very complex fashion. Situated in the present, it is composed of interwoven narratives constructed around the historic voyage of the *Tegetthoff*. The fictional Josef Mazzini, born in Trieste to an Austrian-Italian couple of modest circumstances, lives in Vienna as an occasional truck driver, black market operator and writer of adventure stories. The narrator meets him in a kind of salon organized by the book dealer Anna Koreth for her best customers. Mazzini stands out as being a little odd and different from the other members of this group. After coming across Julius Payer’s report of the North Pole expedition, he embarks on an obsessive quest to reconstruct and ultimately to relive the Weyprecht-Payer voyage, a sequence of events which leads to his disappearance in the glaciers of the Spitzbergens. Sparked by his disappearance, the narrator, although a mere acquaintance, finds himself becoming ever more obsessed with Mazzini’s story. He acquires the missing man’s notebooks and seeks in turn to piece together the narrative of his life. The narrator describes this process as coming to inhabit Mazzini’s world and, in so doing, he carries out the reconstruction of the Weyprecht-Payer expedition that the missing man had begun.³⁶

The narrator presents a summary description of Mazzini and the plot in the short second chapter, *Der Verschollene - Angaben zur Person*. Thereafter, the novel is composed of the two

³⁶ I do not read the narrative reconstruction of the expedition as *Herausgeberfiktion* (e.g. Menke 2000, 448-450). Rather, the narrator should be considered the implicit author. The story is ironic - “bizzarr” and “unwahrscheinlich” - but there is no irony in the makeup of Joseph Mazzini that would bring him to treat the subject in such a manner. “Ein schwächtiger Faschingsnarr” (*Schrecken*, 77) the narrator calls him, painting an image of Mazzini posing before the mirror in his Oslo hotel room with his rifle and snow glasses.

thematically connected narratives, the Arctic voyage of the *Tegetthoff* and Mazzini's ill-fated trip to the Spitzbergens in an effort to sail to Franz Joseph Land. With a loose format of alternating chapters, the stories are presented as interwoven and juxtaposed fragments to be reassembled through the act of reading. The novel's flow is further fragmented by excursions dealing with the history of Arctic exploration. These digressions create further parallel mini-narratives on the same theme of failed Polar expeditions. Through its anachronistic structure, the stories move back and forth from one time layer and theme to another, lending the work a feeling of mythological timelessness heightened by repetitive references to such texts as the Book of Job.³⁷

At the same time, the voyage of the *Tegetthoff* and the life of Mazzini are framed by and narrated from an extradiegetic layer presented in the first person. What stands out most about the narrator is his presence and overtness, constantly commenting and reflecting upon the novel, his sources and the process of its writing. This has the effect of foregrounding the act of narration itself. The book ends, moreover, with the narrator refusing to bring closure to the novel, a position that brings to mind theories regarding the nature of historical writing associated with the work of Hayden White. Ultimately, the most striking characteristic of *Schrecken* is the metafictional nature of the work, which transforms it into a commentary on the writing of history.

Within the logic of the novel, both the *Tegetthoff* and Mazzini stories are presented as historical narratives in that they are ostensibly reconstructions based upon the sifting and analysis of evidence. The narration of the Weyprecht-Payer expedition sometimes adopts the appearance of distance expected of historical writing but this disappears repeatedly as the drama of events is foregrounded. Payer's fanatical energy leading the exploration teams is one

³⁷ Noteworthy, in this regard, are chapter 15 *Aufzeichnungen aus dem Lande Uz* and the extensive quotations from Job at the beginning of the *Dritter Excurs - Der Große Nagel*, this last phrase itself a reference to Inuit mythology. The struggle of the crew with the compression of the ice pack can be construed as a mythic confrontation between man and nature on the margin of the civilized world. Another mythic reference is to the circularity of time and eternal recurrence as the crew, trapped in the ice for two Arctic winters, experience almost everything twice. Ransmayr's work, including *Schrecken*, has often been interpreted metaphorically as dealing with mythology and aesthetics (e.g. Martin 2010, Lamb-Faffelberger 2001, Menke 2000, Hoffmann 2006). Lynne Cook speaks about "the etiological function of myth" being extended in *Schrecken* to justify "the myth of the superiority of the human animal over its environment" and Mazzini's attempt to reenact the Weyprecht-Payer expedition as an example of recurrence, albeit in a de-energized and distorted form. (Cook 1998, 230-231)

such example. Interested readers may compare the dramatic manner in which the episode of Zaninovich and the sled falling into a crevasse is portrayed in the novel (*Schrecken* 225-229) with Payer's matter of fact summary of the same event in a presentation before the Royal Geographic Society (Payer 1875, 13). Similarly, the discourse of the Mazzini narrative is unstable, shifting repeatedly into and out of an auctorial style of narration. We see this, for example, in the Longyearbyen scenes of the conversations between Mazzini and Flaherty, who laughingly calls him "Weyprecht," or in Mazzini's dream sequence at the beginning of *Campi Deserti*. Ultimately, this auctorial style predominates and is a marker of fictionality acting as a counterpoint to the apparent historical discourse of the novel.

2.3.2 Irony and the North Pole expedition as metonymy³⁸

In the introduction to a book of essays on Austrian literature, W. G. Sebald notes that the representative works of the new Austrian writers from Thomas Bernhard to Christoph Ransmayr portray "die in der angst- und ahnungsvollen Aufzeichnung der Veränderung des Lichts, der Landschaft und des Wetters allmählich aufdämmernde Erkenntnis der im weitesten Umraum sich vollziehenden Dissolution und Zerrütung der natürlichen Heimat des Menschen."³⁹ This description of the portrayal of nature applies well to *Schrecken* and one theme of Ransmayr criticism is the metaphoric use of extreme landscapes to represent a modernist crisis of the human condition. To speak of the dissolution of *Heimat* in the Austrian context must, in my view, point to that nation's unique history, the singular modern event of which is the collapse of the Habsburg state, what Sebald refers to as the "vielfach traumatischen Entwicklung, die Österreich von dem weit ausgedehnten Habsburger-Imperium zur diminutiven Alpenrepublik ... durchlaufen hat."⁴⁰ Both the metahistorical form of *Schrecken* and its irony invite reflection not only on the process of historical writing but also on the events themselves. Such an analysis suggests that the failure of the North Pole

³⁸ The idea that the Weyprecht-Payer expedition could be interpreted as a metonymy for more significant historical events was suggested to me in conversation by my M.A. advisor Professor Jürgen Heizmann.

³⁹ W. G. Sebald (1991). *Unheimliche Heimat. Essays zur österreichischen Literatur*. Salzburg und Wien: Residenz Verlag, 16. Print.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

expedition, in itself a minor historical episode, may be seen as a metonymy for the ultimate failure and disappearance of the Habsburg Empire.

The Weyprecht-Payer story takes up the greater part of the novel and constitutes its key narrative. It is significant that the narrator refers to the expedition as “bizzarr” and “unwahrscheinlich.” The drama with which Ransmayr imbues the narrative of the *Tegetthoff* notwithstanding, the event itself is given an ironical treatment: a voyage of exploration trapped in the ice almost as soon as it sets out, dragged by currents to a glacier-covered archipelago which the leaders claim in the name of Austria-Hungary, an empire that will cease to exist less than half a century later. The narrator judges the past and characterizes these events as “die Größe und die Tragik, auch die Lächerlichkeit dessen, was gewesen ist” (*Schrecken*, 227). Altogether, the Weyprecht-Payer expedition is best described as a grandiose fiasco (Heizmann, 4), and the story frames anecdotes to heighten this sense of irony.⁴¹ Consider, for example, the solemnity of naming and planting the flag on Franz Joseph Land (today the Russian territory of *Semlja Frantsa Josifa*) or the bottles dropped into the Arctic Ocean with reports signed by Weyprecht and Payer. When the first is found 48 years later, the imperial addressee in Vienna no longer exists. Moreover, irony is inherent in the interpretive framework built into the novel as its focus is displaced from the diegetic level of the historical event to the present as metahistorical reflection, what Nünning calls the “ironische Gestaltung von Geschichte als Objekt der Rekonstruktion” (Nünning 1995, 281).

The expedition itself is like a miniature image of Austria-Hungary. Icebound for two years, stasis is the expedition’s chief characteristic while Weyprecht attends to his crew’s physical and spiritual needs with a high-minded paternalism. Sponsored by Viennese aristocrats; led by specialists from Bohemia, Moravia and Hungary; manned by Dalmatian and Italian sailors, the whole enterprise is representative of the multi-national empire which, in the catastrophic defeat of WWI, will soon collapse into its constituent parts. The critique of empire is omnipresent, symbolized, for example in the contempt of the centre for the southern

⁴¹ Julius Payer summarized the voyage before the Royal Geographic Society in London as follows: “It was not the object of the Austrian Expedition to search for the unknown country which the results of our preliminary expedition, undertaken in 1871, had made it likely would be found to the north of Novaya Zemlya, but to discover a north-east passage. This, its principal object, the Expedition has failed to attain, and the country referred to was discovered instead.” (Payer 1875, 1)

cultures. “Nur keine Südländer!” is the reaction of the Imperial navy to Weyprecht’s decision to enlist southerners rather than Norwegians or Russians for the crew. It is expressed most forcefully in the scenes where Payer drives his team ever northward in the exploration of Franz Joseph Land. A deep social cleavage exists between the leader and his men. For all that the crew suffer to make these discoveries possible, history - another metonymy - will speak only of Payer and Weyprecht.

“Weil man den Kommandanten zu Lande seinerzeit an der Wiener Neustädter Militärakademie zum Lieutenanten der Infanterie ausgebildet hat, heißt nun gleich eine ganze Insel, die wie eine ungeheure Miesmuschel im *Austria-Sund* liegt, *Insel Wiener Neustadt*. Payer streut seine Namen wie Bannsprüche über den Archipel, forscht dabei in seinen Erinnerungen und findet immer neue Städte und Freunde, die er im Eis verewigen will, und vergißt dabei doch nie, auch dem Herrscherhaus, der Kunst und der Wissenschaft zu huldigen” (*Schrecken*, 218-219).

His loyalty to the Empire notwithstanding, a prolepsis in the third excursus portrays Payer as renouncing his former fervour for the discovery of new lands (*Schrecken*, 192-193). His fame as an explorer is short-lived. His achievements are questioned and undermined by Viennese society, the Imperial centre for which he had exerted himself and his crew, by what the narrator describes as “den geheimen Erosionskräften der Monarchie” (*Schrecken*, 267). The thematic connection between the expedition and the end of empire is made clear as the novel quotes from the proclamation of war issued by Franz Joseph I, “der Namenspatron und Herr des letzten Landes der Welt” (*Schrecken*, 272). The Kaiser proclaims that he has to take up the sword to defend the integrity and honour of his monarchy.⁴² This metonymic language and the citation placed in this context serve as an ironic reminder that neither the monarchy nor the Empire survived.

2.4 *Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis* as a metahistorical novel

The purpose of this section is to analyse *Schrecken* as historical fiction according to the categories elaborated by Ansgar Nünning and described in chapter 1 above.⁴³ Such

⁴² “An Meine Völker! ... Die Umtriebe eines haßerfüllten Gegners zwingen mich, zu Wahrung der Ehre Meiner Monarchie ... zum Schwerte zu greifen” (*Schrecken*, 273)

⁴³ The theoretical writings upon which this section is based are Nünning (1995), (1997) and (2004) as well as Heizmann’s unpublished article.

categorizations are empirical in nature and subject to the limitations of the universe of novels on which they are based. In the case of Nünning, these consist mainly of English language historical novels. Nevertheless, *Schrecken* conforms well to the category of metahistorical novel while displaying certain characteristics of historiographical metafiction as well. Works included in both these categories eschew the narrative forms of realistic or traditional historical novels. Primarily auto-referential, they represent “significant innovations in the treatment of history as a literary theme” (Nünning 1997, 224), foregrounding and problematizing the process of historical reconstruction. Typically, the interpretive process is built into the story itself.

“Instead of portraying a historical world on the diegetic level of the characters, metahistorical novels are generally set in the present but concerned with the appropriation, revision and transmission of history” (Nünning 1997, 224). Usually two or more stories on different time levels, including a quest narrative where a figure in the present seeks to reconstruct a past event, are told simultaneously. This has the effect of shifting the focus of the novel from past to present and displacing its centre from direct historical representation to the discovery and reconstruction of events. In other words, the historical content becomes an object of historiographic interest. These novels are typically structured anachronistically so that chronological continuity is presented in fragmented fashion and the transitions between different time levels serve to bring meaning to the narrative set in the present (Nünning 1995, 278).

Metahistorical novels also tend to be characterized by a dense weave of intertextual references from factual and fictional sources and the semantization of the spatial component. Places, landscapes and images are closely associated with the experiences of the characters and constitute a form of transmission of cultural memory (Heizmann, 3) as well as a device linking the time layers of the narrative. Intertextuality may also serve as a form of cultural memory as well as figural representation. These novels display what Nünning calls indirect forms of historical mediation of the past, namely through metonymic, metaphoric and intertextual means (Nünning 1995, 279). As mentioned, the transposition of the historical content to a meta-level as an object of reconstruction is the basic source of its ironic figuration.

There are ample reasons to describe *Schrecken* as a metahistorical novel. Although it presents a reconstruction of the Austro-Hungarian North Pole expedition of 1872-1874, Josef Mazzini's quest to relive the expedition shifts the narrative focus to the present, where the act of historical reconstruction becomes a central theme of the narrative. This is Mazzini's principal function in the novel. He is a flat character in E. M. Forster's sense but this is sufficient for him to play his role as an anachronism seeking to relive the heroism of Arctic exploration in an age when adventure has been mostly replaced by tourism. The narrator pursues a parallel quest on the extradiegetic level trying to understand and fashion a narrative of the events leading to his disappearance. This provides the frame in which the narrator carries out the historical reconstruction of the Weyprecht-Payer expedition. The interpretive process of historiographic reflection also takes place on the extradiegetic level.

It is important to underline that the narratives in *Schrecken* are generated by other narratives of which Payer's report and Mazzini's notebooks are only the most important. The notebooks, for example, are augmented by witness reports from people who knew Mazzini, including the narrator. All these elements represent discursive artifacts of history and culture which, according to postmodern theory, compose the historical record. Other cultural content enters the novel in the form of intertextual references, the considerable number of which is a characteristic of *Schrecken*.

These intertexts go well beyond the citations attributed to the commanders and crew of the *Tegetthoff*. The narrative is nuanced by a host of non-historical references, including many from mythology and the bible. The Book of Job is of particular interest, appealing to the reader's cultural memory to portray the devastating effects of illness and melancholy during the Arctic winters. The Polar ice pack and environment constitute mythic protagonists against which the crew struggle. This Arctic landscape fills the semantic space and is depicted as a source both of great danger and immense beauty. Described eloquently by Julius Payer and rendered in his sketches, the depiction of this extreme landscape as combining horror and the sublime represents a Romantic aesthetic vision (Martin 2010, 152).⁴⁴ The discourse of Romanticism and the Arctic landscape link Payer and Mazzini from the moment the latter comes upon Payer's book until his disappearance into the space and ice. Regarding the first

⁴⁴ Nethersole, moreover, refers to Payer's diary as a romanticist voice (Nethersole 1990, 140).

brief walk on Franz Joseph Land Payer writes: “Es liegt etwas Erhabenes in der Einsamkeit eines noch unbetretenen Landes” (*Schrecken*, 163).⁴⁵ Spatial metaphors are abundant in the novel and they serve multiple purposes. For example, the opening stanza of Petrarch’s sonnet “Solo e pensoso” presents a very old formulation of the metaphor of the wasteland. It links Mazzini to the Italian crew of the *Tegetthoff* and it represents an Italian cultural artifact that may be seen as a counterpoint to the dominant Imperial narrative.

The chief metahistorical characteristic of *Schrecken* is the self-reflexive, metafictional tone omnipresent at the level of extradiegetic narration. Here the narrator problematizes the historical method he is represented as following and highlights his own subjectivity as well as the contradictions of the historical record. In critical writing about *Schrecken*, much is made of the fact that the narrator acts both as storyteller and reader (Lamb-Faffelberger 2001, 280). However, this is nothing other than the historical method. Of more interest, in my view, is the narrator’s recognition that, like all historians, he is not privy to all the facts, so that reconstructing a series of events appears to him as “ein Hinüberwechseln aus der Wirklichkeit in die Wahrscheinlichkeit” (*Schrecken*, 63). The narrativization of events creates only the illusion of reality since the historian decides what becomes fact in order to make his narrative plausible and verisimilar. The subjectivity of the historian’s craft is foregrounded in the novel, for example, in the passage describing the expedition’s arrival in Tromsø. Here, it is noted that the crewmembers’ diaries differ as to the precise date of the ship’s arrival but rather than choose one voice over another the narrator compromises, “Also sage ich: Die Expedition erreichte am zweiten, erreichte am dritten, erreichte am vierten Juli 1872 Tromsø.” (*Schrecken*, 42)

Plausibility and verisimilitude are also aspects of fictional narrative and, indeed, the narrator often breaks the illusion of historical reality. It is New Year’s Eve and he describes how the crew greet 1873 by circling the vessel and singing “Solo e pensoso” for the officers. Then he takes back this picture, “Aber nein, was sie gesungen haben, ist nicht überliefert” (*Schrecken*, 120), thereby breaking the illusion. This motif is repeated elsewhere. On Corpus

⁴⁵ The reference to the sublime is not an accident. In describing the exploration of Franz Joseph Land, he will tell the Royal Geographic Society: “The distant world was sublime in its beauty.” (Payer 1875, 14)

Christi 1872, according to the historical record, the crew pull out of Vienna's *Westbahnhof* "eingehüllt in einer Rauchwolke, die nicht überliefert ist" (*Schrecken*, 38). The cloud of smoke is nothing other than what Barthes, in "L'effet de réel," calls *le détail concret* used to support the illusion of reality, the *vraisemblable* (or *wahrscheinlich*) of fiction. Here, as elsewhere in the novel, Ransmayr juxtaposes conventions of historical and fictional writing and by placing them, in effect, on the same footing, deconstructs the border between the two. The narrator often uses language more appropriate to fiction than history: "ich habe lange an der Vorstellung festgehalten," "ich nehme an" or "ich stelle mir vor." Perhaps gulls flew overhead when Weyprecht addressed the sailors in Fiume - "ich weiß es nicht," says the narrator. Such statements are ironic and undermine the historical narrative by suggesting that the reader is in the realm of the imagination.

In point of fact, Carl Weyprecht never made the statement ascribed to him in Fiume (Menke 2000, 553n19); it is taken from a speech he made in 1876. This fact is interesting in that it demonstrates a key aspect of Ransmayr's method: the manipulation of historical data for literary purposes. The novel never purports to be an historical work but only presents the illusion of one as it reflects upon its own creation. In fact, much of the novel is problematic from the point of view of historical discourse. Extracts from the diaries and reports of expedition participants foster the reality effect of historical writing but, on deeper examination, are highly ambiguous. Although attributed to individuals, no effort is made to identify the sources from which they are drawn. Moreover, the paratextual page "Hinweis" (*Schrecken*, 277), which contains a list of source material - a quasi bibliography - states that "Die Figuren dieses Romans haben an ihrer Geschichte mitgeschrieben." With the repetition of the paratextual word "Roman" from the title, the author confirms the essential fictionality of his work and transforms these historical documents into so many "voices" which make up the fabric of a polyphonic narrative.⁴⁶ The illustrations, as etchings, add drama to the narrative but they are ultimately simulacra, serving merely to suggest reality. Certain illustrations and factual material have clearly been modified. A quotation from the chapter *Vor allem* has been added to the jubilee photograph of the crew (*Schrecken*, 28-29), an insertion which points to

⁴⁶ Among whose voices is that of the deceased machinist, Otto Krisch, a voice from the dead, so to speak.

the literary circularity of the work and the crossing of time and discursive layers. The title given to the list of the crewmembers is highly ironic - *Anwesenheitsliste für ein Drama am Ende der Welt* - as is the list itself which, following the sled dogs and two nameless cats, includes Josef Mazzini as “Nachfahre.” All these elements foreground the fictionality of the novel, its ironic formulation and the illusion-breaking presentation of history.

2.5 Elements of historical metafiction; the novel as chronicle

Although Nünning criticizes Hutcheon’s identity of postmodernism with the sole concept of historiographic metafiction, his schema contains a type of historical novel which he also calls historiographic metafiction. These novels share various strategies with metahistorical novels.⁴⁷ However, historiographic metafiction in Nünning’s sense represents those works in which metafictional argumentation about the problems of historiography is presented in such a pronounced manner that questions of historical theory occupy the centre of the novel.⁴⁸ Not history but historiography is the dominant reference field and the historiographic questioning is extensive and recurrent.

Heizmann notes that the narrator calls himself a chronicler and refers to him as such in his article. “Chronicler” is an important concept in this context. An historical chronicle is not a narrative in the usual sense of a completed story. It is rather a sequence of events noted and described by a chronicler which begins and ends *in media res*. It is a legitimate form of historical representation but one without the closure associated with narrative. Realist historiography uses chronicles as source material from which to create stories that follow the common form of narrative; that is, historical events are reorganized into stories having a beginning, middle and end. “(T)he plot of a narrative imposes a meaning on the events that

⁴⁷ e.g. semanticized space, intertextuality, a montage of fragmentary and anachronistic story elements and characters whose principal role is as objects of metahistorical reflection.

⁴⁸ “Romane, in denen die metafiktionale Erörterung von ontologischen, epistemologischen, methodischen und darstellungstechnischen Problemen der Historiographie in so ausgeprägter Weise auftritt, daß Fragen der Geschichtstheorie ins Zentrum rücken.” (Nünning 1995, 285)

comprise its story level by revealing at the end a structure that was immanent in the events *all along*” (White 1980, 23).⁴⁹

The appeal of realist historical discourse is simply this, the “imposition, upon events that are represented as real, of the formal coherency that stories possess” (ibid.). This is the programme which the chronicler/narrator sets out at the beginning of *Schrecken*. He informs us that he wants to tell the story of Mazzini because otherwise he cannot bring closure to the fact of his disappearance. He then situates Mazzini’s story in a time frame covering a period that begins a century earlier, as Weyprecht raises a crew for his expedition. This event long past is what will drive Mazzini to travel north. Yet, at the end, we see the chronicler in his studio looking at the maps and material he used to write the novel and refusing to bring closure to his story: “Ich wurde nichts beenden und nichts werde ich aus der Welt schaffen” (*Schrecken*, 274). In fact, he cannot because from the wealth of his material, he can conceive of many plausible interpretations. “Mein Bericht ist immer auch ein Gerichthalten über das Vergangene, ein Abwägen, ein Gewichten, ein Vermuten und Spielen mit den Möglichkeiten der Wirklichkeit.” (*Schrecken*, 227) This is an ironic interpretation of the process of historical writing but nevertheless valid. The chronicler ultimately leaves the task of closure to the reader.

In a sense, the whole novel takes the form of a chronicle, although this is not immediately evident due to the fragmentary nature of the presentation. Reformulated in chronological order, the chronicle presents, in novelistic form, a history of Arctic exploration from its earliest times to the conquest of the North Pole and beyond. The chapter on the Austro-Hungarian expedition is the most complete part of the chronicle but even this chapter is extended past the two years of its tragicomic events to include the deaths of Weyprecht and Payer and the end of Austria-Hungary itself. With the Mazzini narrative, the reader is presented with a depiction of the modern Arctic and, in a sense, the story of Arctic exploration is resolved when Mazzini’s narrative brings the reader to the Spitzbergens. History has now divided the Arctic between the countries bordering the region and only the old historical

⁴⁹ In this article, White compares annals, chronicles and realist historiography as distinct forms of historical representation. Its central point is a criticism of mainstream historiography which presents itself as maintaining the “discourse of the real” as against the “discourse of the imaginary.”

names remain. Everything is surveyed, ordered and controlled and the Northeast Passage is open to Russian icebreakers. The people whom Mazzini meets in Tromsø and Longyearbyen, when they are not tourists, are there for higher wages or because they are eccentrics distancing themselves from civilization. The north has lost its mythic properties.

Therefore, it appears relevant to ask what exactly the reader may extract from this chronicle. One answer is that which I suggested earlier: the narrative of the expedition and its aftermath is a metonymy for the collapse of Austria-Hungary. But there are other narratives as well that could be taken from *Schrecken*, e.g.: the precarious notion of *Heimat* in conditions of modernity as reflected in Mazzini's life and disappearance; a *Zivilisationskritik* which suggests that the only escape from modernity is by dropping out; or a meditation on the nature of historical writing. This interpretive process remains open to the reader. In any case, the existence of a narrator cum chronicler is an indication that *Schrecken* as an historical novel also shares characteristics of Nünning's category of historiographic metafiction.

2.6 *Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis* as a work of postmodernism

Realist or "objective" historiography is based upon certain assumptions concerning the nature of the historical event: that its ontological status is not in doubt and that it can be known and explained, that is, reconstructed as historical narrative. Both documentary and traditional realist historical novels are based on the principal that the historical event is not problematic. This certitude is rejected by postmodernism, which recognizes that historical narratives are subject to the choices historians make in the selection and creation of facts.⁵⁰ As a result, postmodern historical fiction in its more complex forms is characterized by what Nünning calls the "Problematisierung des Status von Realitätsreferenzen" (Nünning 1995, 281).

Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis is a novel which focuses attention on the act of historical reconstruction. Following Nünning's model, it does so in two ways: explicitly, through questions raised by the narrator about the historical sources and the process of

⁵⁰ "The issue of representation and its epistemological claims leads directly to the problem ... regarding the nature and status of 'fact' in both history-writing and fiction-writing. All past 'events' are potential historical 'facts,' but the ones that become facts are those that are chosen to be narrated." (Hutcheon 2002, 71-72)

interpretation and, implicitly, through the structure of the novel itself, which displaces attention away from history as a series of events and towards the present where the process by which these events are transformed into narrative takes place. Moreover, the novel is constructed in such a way as to blur the boundary between fact and fiction on which realist historiography is based.

This blurring, as we have seen, is one of the hallmarks of postmodern historical novels, and it is achieved in *Schrecken* through strategies such as the transformation of the historical record into a variety of narrative voices. In spite of the extensive citations, the manner in which incidents are dramatized makes it difficult to separate the fictional from the real. Did Alexander Klotz really leave the ship to walk home? Does the drama with which the exploration of Franz Joseph Land is represented have an historical source? The narrator is consistently tentative and questioning about the historical record, as we have seen. The chapter *Aus der Welt - Ein Nekrolog*, which contextualizes the *Tegetthoff* voyage in the broader history of the end of Austria-Hungary, clearly uses fictional means such as the intimate description of the death of Weyprecht. Payer's enemies denigrate his stories as "fabelhaft, pure Literatur," a description which may well be applied to *Schrecken* as a whole.

The novel, therefore, adheres to Hutcheon's description of postmodern literature which "works to situate itself within historical discourse without surrendering its autonomy as fiction." (Hutcheon 1989, 4) The extensive use of intertextuality creates an ever-present merging of different discursive layers (Scheck 1994, 289) from both literary and "real" sources without any distinction made concerning the value of each in historical discourse. The novel also makes use of a specific form of intertextuality, namely the crewmembers' citations, as historical paratexts inserted directly into the narrative. I have already suggested that these paratexts are problematic from the point of view of historical discourse. They are, however, highly effective as a strategy of representation. Thereby, the paratexts become a "parodic play with what we might call the trappings of realist representation" (Hutcheon 2002, 86).

Moreover, in postmodernist fashion, the novel's basic structure subverts the dichotomy between history and fiction. This is built into the Mazzini narrative, where the fictional character is presented as a descendant of the real Antonio Scarpa who sailed on the *Tegetthoff* and whose heroic voyage he tries to emulate. Mazzini's fictional quest narrative is juxtaposed

with the historical episode of the Austro-Hungarian expedition. In the context of the novel, these narratives are presented as being of the same ontological order; both are considered real events, but their treatment as stories is somehow inverted. Ransmayr's narrative clearly sets out to transform the record of the expedition into a story and it begins with a timeworn, parodic phrase "Es war ein heller, windriger Märztag des Jahres 1872 an der adriatischen Küste" (*Schrecken*, 11). It is the story of a struggle for survival against the natural forces of the Arctic in which the crew prevail and discover one of the last specks of unexplored land on earth. The commanders view the enterprise as something historic, a view that can only be sustained as long as their achievements result from a higher motivation, that of science or of sustaining the honour of Austria-Hungary. However, the pathos of Weyprecht's death and the manner in which Viennese society belittle Payer's achievement cast a different light back on the whole enterprise. It can no longer be characterized as one of adventure and heroism but of disappointment and failure, a dissonance which lends the story its essential irony. In this manner, Ransmayr creates a complete narrative with his treatment of the historical record.

The Mazzini narrative, on the other hand, evolves in a manner opposed to that of the expedition. As fiction, we would expect a complete story about Mazzini but the narrator denies the reader a meaningful ending, i.e. the closure needed to accept the protagonist's disappearance, which he set out to achieve in the first place. The episodes of Mazzini's life remain a chronicle of events open to many interpretations. This is one of the ironies of *Schrecken*. That which is derived from real events is constituted as a story, fictionalized as it were, while that which is fiction is denied the closure of a story.

As may be expected, *Schrecken* is parodic. The Mazzini narrative may be seen as another in the list of failed North Pole expeditions or as the representation of an anachronistic Romanticism. Mazzini himself is presented figuratively as a composite and prisoner of Arctic myth and geography.⁵¹ The abundant paratextual citations in the novel parody historical

⁵¹ From chapter 13 onboard the *Cradle*: "Josef Mazzini unterbricht seinen täglichen Rundgang durch das Schiff in der Messe und betrachtet sein Spiegelbild im Glas der Wandkarte: Quer über sein Gesicht verläuft die weiß gezackte Linie der sommerlichen Treibeisgrenze, an seinen Schultern trägt er Landzungen und Inseln, über seinem Kopf die Neonglorie des unschiffbaren Eises und wie ein Häftlingsschild vor seiner Brust die Tabelle der Sonnenauf- und Untergänge." (*Schrecken*, 165).

writing and the novel as a whole parodies adventure fiction. Events are represented in a serious and dramatic tone, expressive of the endeavours of the crew. At the same time, the extensive use of the discourse of myth stands in opposition to a model of realist representation. As the narrator observes when introducing the theme, the story of the North Pole expedition is so improbable as to be almost fantastic. The mediation of experience through pre-existing texts is a postmodern strategy (Martin 2010, 152). With the discourse of myth, “(the) meaning of otherwise unimaginable events is seen to reside in their resemblance to *timeless* archetypal stories” (White 1996, 26-27).

Schrecken uses both myth and its disappearance as strategies of representation. As long as the Arctic is represented as a mythical landscape and the object of a centuries-old drive for exploration, the novel is able to cite Job and use the reader’s cultural memory to invoke images which are otherwise difficult to represent. On the other hand, when Mazzini travels north, he finds that “schließlich lag ja auch über der Arktis nichts als die Gegenwart” (*Schrecken*, 137). Fabled places disappear in conditions of modernity, an observation also made in *Vor allem*. With its collapse in 1918, the Habsburg monarchy also showed itself to have been a myth. The collapse of such a myth, foregrounded in the novel’s last chapter, modifies the meaning of the narrative and heightens its reality effect.

2.7 Ransmayr’s poetics in *Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis*

“Geschichten ereignen sich nicht, Gechichten werden erzählt.” (Ransmayr 2012, 5)

Events in themselves do not tell stories; rather, they must be transformed into narrative to achieve this result. When Mazzini tells Anna Koreth’s other guests that he is redesigning the past with his stories (*Schrecken*, 21), the guests protest that if his stories turn out to be true, it is no different than a simple statement of historical fact (“ein reiner Tatsachenbericht”), but Mazzini persists in believing that he is creating reality. For Ransmayr, “die Erfindung der Wirklichkeit” is a programmatic statement about literary creation:

“*schreiben* für mich (heißt), in einem Erzählraum zu leben, der im Lauf der Zeit von realen Lebensumständen allmählich ununterscheidbar wird ...

die Grundfrage bleibt, ob einer erfundenen, bloß behaupteten Figur durch ihre Verwandlung in Sprache zu einer Art von Wirklichkeit verholfen werden kann.”

If the characters, whatever the writer may demand of them, appear plausible within the narrative space, then it is possible to invent reality. (Ransmayr 2004, 111-112)

We may well question whether one can even talk about such a thing as a simple statement of fact in historical representation or whether the mask of meaning in Hayden White's formulation (White 1980, 24) is not the way in which historical narratives create reality. In any case, what distinguishes literature from a *Tatsachenbericht* is essentially artifice, the "Verwandlung in Sprache" of the event. Transparent representation, the so-called "innocent eye" of visual art theory, characterizes the mimesis of the traditional historical novel. With the advent of modernism and its metafictional impulse, the artifice is rendered visible and postmodernism has carried this tendency to new levels of self-conscious metafiction. Ransmayr is part of this new movement and it is clear that his goal is not simply adventure and entertainment.

Schrecken begins with an obscure prologue where the narrator muses about the nature of adventure in our time. *Vor allem* postulates that the notion of adventure has disappeared, replaced by the illusion that air travel makes the whole world easily accessible. Yet, man's natural state is that of a runner and pedestrian, which presumably means we are part of and subject to the natural landscape. Mazzini confronts this contradiction, and in the lead off to the novel's chapter 6, *Flugrouten in die innere und äußere Leere*, as he begins his trip north, Payer is quoted: "Ein mühevoller Weg ist die Reise in die innere Polarwelt" (*Schrecken*, 62). He is in search of an authentic adventure but is often looked down upon as a mere tourist. *Vor allem* is taken almost verbatim from the first paragraph of Christoph Ransmayr / Rudi Palla, "Der letzte Mensch," which also leads off with the same quotation from Payer. This article tells the story of an Austrian TV crew who make an attempt to reach Franz Joseph Land on board the Norwegian Polar research ship *Lance* out of Longyearbyen, only to be forced to turn back due to heavy ice conditions before reaching their goal. Upon their return to Vienna, the TV crew are sent back to the Spitzbergens to interview a hermit and hunter named Harald Soleim. Of British origin, Soleim is a drop-out who now lives by hunting in a remote spot in

the Spitzbergens. He is perhaps the only person on the archipelago still using a dog sled for transportation rather than sport. Man as runner and pedestrian applies to him.⁵²

The prologue is not the only citation from “Der letzte Mensch” to appear in *Schrecken*. Before their first trip north, the TV crew corresponded with the governor of the Spitzbergens, explaining their project to retrace the North Pole expedition and sail to Franz Joseph Land. Elements of his reply discouraging such a project found their way into the novel as the letter to Mazzini from the fictional governor Thorsen in answer to his inquires about ships travelling to Franz Joseph Land (*Schrecken*, 66). With minor changes, the novel repeats the article’s description of the dangers of hiking on glaciers (*Schrecken*, 172). Mazzini’s voyage on the *Cradle* mirrors in all essentials the TV crew’s trip on the *Lance*, including the passengers they sailed with: zoologists culling seals to test the spread of industrial pollutants and geologists analyzing the seabed. Harald Soleim becomes the hermit and hunter Jostein Aker in the novel. The novel’s Malcolm Flaherty is based upon a man named Robin Buzza whom the TV crew met in Longyearbyen. In summer, Buzza exercises his dog team using the same kind of contraption which the fictional Kjetil Fyrand uses. Their dog teams share the same names.

Although Ransmayr had never been north, “Der letzte Mensch” reads like a documentary article and is the source of much of the atmospherics which lend these chapters their reality effect. In effect, the article has furnished a whole discursive layer for the novel, providing its representation of the modern Arctic.⁵³ The prologue to *Schrecken* is easier to understand in its original context: at a time when tourism reaches into every corner of the world, there are places like the Spitzbergens where men who are still “Fußgänger und Läufer” can escape to and this theme is transposed to *Schrecken*. Moreover, “Der letzte Mensch” presents a short, highly ironic description of the Weyprecht-Payer North Pole expedition, confirming the irony with which the expedition narrative and the notion of patriotism are treated in *Schrecken*.⁵⁴

⁵² I assume that Rudi Palla was part of the TV crew and that the photographs which appeared in the first Brandstätter edition of *Schrecken* were taken during these voyages. These photographs include a large wooden frame used for drying pelts which is described in “Der letzte Mensch”.

⁵³ “Irritierenderweise finden sich Motive und Passagen dieser Reportagen fast wörtlich im Roman, werden also von einem traditionell als faktische Beschreibung rezipierten Format in den fiktionalen Text überführt.” (Peter 2013, 115 n59).

⁵⁴ It is described as “(eine) Expedition, die ... einen unter Gletschern völlig begrabenen Archipel aus Urgestein entdeckt und diese trostlosigkeit Kaiser-Franz-Joseph-Land getauft hatte; eine *patriotische*

It is not difficult to see the attraction that the history of the *Tegetthoff* expedition may have for an author: the dramatic story of the crew's fight for survival, the horrors of the shifting ice, the escape. Moreover, the event is well documented, with Payer's report itself being of great interest. The issue is how to fashion such a narrative into something other than melodrama or adventure. In the event, *Schrecken* takes the complex form of a metahistorical novel, where the artifices of narrative construction and historical reconstruction are foregrounded. The fictional Mazzini and the historical expedition narratives are linked throughout with devices such as simultaneity of narration, repetition of phrases and images and a collage effect of juxtaposed fragments from past and present in an anachronistic narrative structure. Thereby, the often disparate and contradictory elements that constitute the story coexist within the narrative space.⁵⁵

Overall, the fragmentary structure of the narrative avoids giving the dry, distanced effect of historical writing to the reconstruction of the expedition: "Diese Montagetechnik schafft jedoch, überraschenderweise, keine dokumentarisch-sachliche Distanz, sie stiftet vielmehr authentische Intimität, ein Mit-Leiden des Lesers." (Modick 1985, 188). Ransmayr thereby achieves what Hutcheon calls the retention of the "general apparatus of novelistic realism" in spite of the metafictional self-reflexivity of the novel. In fact, it is in the nature of collage that it remains representational "while still breaking with realism through its fragmentation and discontinuity" (see Hutcheon 2002, 84-85).⁵⁶

A key device is the transformation of the historical sources into a polyphonic *Zitatroman* (Kopp-Marx 2005, 234). Ransmayr treats the diaries and reports as competing dramatic

Großtat, wie eine Kommentatorenstimme aus dem Off dem Fernsehpublikum noch im Jahre 1982 weismachen sollte. Einmal mehr würde sich damit die Realität einer Expedition in ein abenteuerliches Vexierbild verwandeln. Denn die k. u. k.-Polarexpedition ... war die tragikomische Organisation schmerzhaftester Strapazen - insofern durchaus österreichisch, aber keineswegs patriotisch" (Ransmayr/Palla 1983, 55).

⁵⁵ On creating this kind of effect, Ransmayr has written, "im Erzählraum liegen Mögliches, zumindest Plausibles - und Notwendiges, Tatsächliches, kurz: *alles, was der fall ist* - bloß durch hauchdünne, oszillierende Membrane getrennt nebeneinander" (Ransmayr 2004, 14). Nina Peter discusses these aspects of Ransmayr's poetics in Peter 2013, 113-116.

⁵⁶ Messner has said that, on the basis of this novel, he believed Ransmayr to have had experience in the Arctic. (Rheinhold Messner, "Langsame Verdüsterung. Der genaue Beobachter einer Welt hinter dieser Welt." In *Die Erfindung der Wirklichkeit: Zum Werk von Christoph Ransmayr*. Ed. Uwe Wittstock. Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1997, 82-84).

voices. The officer and crew confront not only the darkness and danger of the moving ice but also each other from the opposing realities of culture, class and station aboard ship. This opposition is reflected in the following phrase from the title of the fourth chapter, “die Wirklichkeit ist teilbar.” The commanders are variously serving the goals of science, personal achievement and the honour of the fatherland but the crew have signed on for the extra pay. The narrator underlines that the journals kept by the lower ranks offer a perspective on the expedition completely different from those of the officers.⁵⁷ These competing voices give the representation of the expedition much of its fictional, dramatic quality and its essential tension. They also underline simmering social conflicts in Austria-Hungary, a fact which supports the interpretation of the reconstruction of the failed expedition as a metonymy for the collapse of empire.

The differing voices are readily apparent, from the exhilarated and poetic tone of Julius Payer and the measured scientific quality of Weyprecht’s citations to the laconic phrases left behind by Krisch and Haller (see Eggebrecht 1997, 77-79). Citations attributed to the commanders express a varying discourse of adventure, Romanticism, the Enlightenment and aesthetics. However, the narrator needs to interpret the laconic comments of the crew. He notes that Haller’s entry marking the death of Krisch expresses emotion with the addition of two exclamation points. The narrator also colours his own part of the narrative with a tone varying from ironic questioning to ardent representation (Eggebrecht uses the terms *leidenschaftlich* and *elegisch* to describe the latter). Only Mazzini has no specific voice. His story is merely told, not shown, in a succinct and often ironic fashion with traces of pathos.

Critics have underlined how extreme, deserted landscapes are a persistent metaphor in Ransmayr’s work. In *Schrecken*, Mazzini is shown succumbing to the draw of empty places before he is swallowed up by the landscape: “die Kraft jenes Sogs, der in der Leere, der Zeitlosigkeit und dem Frieden der Wüste seinen Ursprung hat” (*Schrecken*, 242). The empty landscape may also be seen as a symbol of the impulse to literary creation. Elsewhere, Ransmayr has written of “das Bedürfnis, leere Orte, weiße Flecken mit Geschichten, Bildern

⁵⁷ “Auch in der kleinen Gesellschaft an Bord der *Tegetthoff* waren die Journale der Untertanen von denen der Befehlshaber so verschieden, daß es manchmal schien, als würde in den Kojen und Kajüten nicht an einer einzigen, sondern an der Chronik mehrerer, einander ganz fremder Expeditionen geschrieben. Jeder berichtete aus einem anderen Eis.” (*Schrecken*, 42)

zu erfüllen” (Ransmayr 2004, 106). Franz Joseph Land is described in *Schrecken* as the last “weißer Flecken” of the world’s atlas to be filled.

In his presentation at the literary archive in Marbach, Ransmayr showed a landscape photograph he took of Franz Joseph Land during his 2003 trip to the Arctic. At that time, he told his audience, he had the curious feeling of having created the place (“dass ich es erfunden habe”) because a long time ago he had written *Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis* without ever having been there. The expression “die Erfindung der Wirklichkeit” readily comes to mind. Although the novel draws its narratives from real events, it is nevertheless an imaginary voyage, the realist apparatus of which is based on extensive research: “ich (habe) Polarreisende und heimgekehrte Bewohner arktischer Stationen befragt, ihre Tagebücher und Berichte gelesen, Gemälde und Fotos betrachtet oder Tiefenlotungen mit den Blauschattierungen auf meinen Eismeerkarten verglichen” (*Zweiter Geburtstag*, Ransmayr 2012, 273). At the end of the novel, the reader steps into the narrator’s studio. Those same blue maps are on the walls and the narrator is pointing out where different episodes of the story have taken place: “Das ist mein Land, sage ich” (*Schrecken*, 274). I take this to mean the land of his creation. Perhaps the centre of the novel lies in this representation of literary creation.

3. Daniel Kehlmann, *Die Vermessung der Welt: Roman*

3.1 Reception of the novel

In an interview with the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), Daniel Kehlmann recounts the origin of *Die Vermessung der Welt* (Kehlmann 2006, 26-27). While spending two months in Mexico City to immerse himself in South American literature and study the country, he encountered the historical personage of Alexander von Humboldt, who is very present in Mexico. Kehlmann perceived strong comic elements both in the personage and in his adventures and was surprised that no one else seemed to have had the same impression; no one remarked on the comic effect of the uniform Humboldt constantly wore, his correcting the captain's navigational techniques on the voyage from Spain and his inability to understand why his Indian carriers and guides reacted with hostility when he removed corpses from burial sites. Kehlmann wanted to write a novel in the style of magic realism and perceived Humboldt as the key to such a project. The explorer had traversed the world where magic realism originated, but did so as a German. The fact that Gauß had stayed with Humboldt during the 1828 scientific congress in Berlin provided the nucleus of the story. All the comic details noted above found their way into the novel.

Kehlmann considers that in his travels across the Americas Humboldt represented a specific German worldview, Weimar classicism, much as British colonialists carried their European worldview to Africa. He expresses this notion ironically as “der Botschafter Weimars in Macondo,” a phrase which appeared in an article in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ) in October of 2004, almost a year before the publication of *Vermessung*⁵⁸. At that time Kehlmann was well into the writing of the novel and was reacting to the media enthusiasm about Humboldt surrounding the appearance of a new edition of *Kosmos* edited by Hans Magnus Enzensberger. *Der Spiegel* had celebrated this event as a rediscovery of Humboldt and published an issue featuring his portrait on the magazine cover and a lead article lauding

⁵⁸ Daniel Kehlmann. “Masochist. Mit Alexander von Humboldt haben wir einen neuen Heros.” *Süddeutscher Zeitung*. October 5, 2004.

him as a model for Germans.⁵⁹ In the SZ article, Kehlmann ironizes the official “rediscovery” of a man whose written work has always remained available, about whom hundreds of books have been written but whose views are today largely outmoded.

Vermessung is an historical novel and satire about two German luminaries of the late Enlightenment period: the explorer and naturalist Alexander von Humboldt and the mathematician Carl Friedrich Gauß. In a way, it was a lucky circumstance for the reception of the novel that Humboldt, the main butt of Kehlmann’s satire, was lionized such a short time before its publication.⁶⁰ The novel appeared in September 2005, and became a runaway best seller. It spent months on top of the German best seller lists and was short-listed for the 2005 *Deutscher Buchpreis*. In June 2007, FAZ reported that sales of the book had reached the million mark.⁶¹

A resounding commercial success in German-speaking markets, *Vermessung* was also translated and distributed widely abroad. It did particularly well in the UK, France and Italy. Perhaps unsurprisingly, results in Spain and Latin America were mediocre. Kehlmann sees his novel as a satire about German national character and culture, what he expresses cryptically as “was es heißt, deutsch zu sein.” According to him, the critical reception in Germany often ignored this aspect of the novel, seeing it instead as being about science and two cranky old men (Kehlmann 2006, 27-28). Abroad, however, *Vermessung* was read as a novel about Germany (Kehlmann 2005a, 178) and critics generally agreed that *Vermessung* is a highly entertaining work.⁶² The humour of the novel was a key element in its success abroad, something to which the title of Julia Stein’s article attests: “Germans and humor in the same

⁵⁹ “Der geniale Abenteurer.” *Der Spiegel*, 38, September 18, 2004. 162-174. Web. September 2014. The same issue contains a feature interview with Enzensberger who extols the pertinence of *Kosmos* for present day Germany.

⁶⁰ “Sicher hat ihm geholfen, dass Hans Magnus Enzensberger sein großes Projekt im Humboldt-Jahr auflegte und den »Kosmos« als Prachtband neu herausbrachte.” (Preußner 2008, 73).

⁶¹ For the reception of *Vermessung*, see the articles by Klaus Zeyringer and Julia Stein listed in the bibliography.

⁶² *Süffiges Lesevergnügen* in the words of one reviewer. See some of the critical comments about *Vermessung* summarized in Preußner (2008), 73-74.

book.” This is ironic, of course, but perfectly appropriate for a novel whose German author outrageously mines stereotypes about Germans for their comic effect.⁶³

In 2006, Kehlmann received the prestigious *Kleist-Preis*. The address delivered on this occasion by Uwe Wittstock spoke largely about his achievements in *Vermessung* (Wittstock 2006, 9-16). Wittstock alluded to some critics being provoked by the novel’s deconstruction of traditional world views⁶⁴ but he defended Kehlmann’s poetic of the historical novel, lying somewhere between fiction and fact, between bald lies and clever commentary.⁶⁵ Wittstock’s remarks reflected the fact that German critics were not unanimous in their praise for the novel which, along with popular success, also generated controversy.

The sharpest criticism was in response to the novel’s iconoclastic tone, particularly in its treatment of Humboldt who over the years has achieved iconic status in Germany. The “scientific superstar of 2004” was how one researcher referred to Humboldt, with reference to the publicity surrounding the new edition of *Kosmos* (Holl 2012, 47). Now Humboldt scholars were incensed that the hugely successful *Vermessung* was being read as a serious work of history, creating what they saw as a distorted image of the man and belittling his achievements. In 2012, almost an entire number of the *Internationale Zeitschrift für Humboldt Studien* entitled “À propos Kehlmann” was devoted to a criticism of Kehlmann in an effort to set the historical record straight (see Ette 2012 and Holl 2012). Of course, *Vermessung* is an historical novel the fictionality of which is clear. Kehlmann has talked and written about how he fictionalized the lives of his main characters, which is also evident from signals given within the narration itself. One need look no further than the paratextual description *Roman* in the book’s title. This combination of fictional discourse used to depict historical lives is characteristic of a genre labelled “fictional historical biography,” which I describe below in section 4.2.1 of the chapter on *Marbot* concerning forms of biographical discourse. That

⁶³ The eccentricities and quirkiness of the main characters was one of the reasons for the novel’s success in the UK, where the public has always shown “die größte Affinität zu spleenigen Forschern und trockenem Humor.” (Stein 2008, 140).

⁶⁴ “Wer will, kann Kehlmanns Buch in formaler Hinsicht durchaus als Provokation verstehen.” (Wittstock 2006, 13)

⁶⁵ “Er siedelt seinen Roman ... in einem eigentümlich schwebenden, schwer festlegbaren Reich an, das irgendwo zwischen Fiktion und Fakten beheimatet ist, zwischen dreister Behauptung und historischer Rekonstruktion, zwischen glatter Lüge und klugem Kommentar.” (Wittstock 2006, 14)

readers still can view the novel as historical writing only shows how porous the frontier between fictional and historical narration really is.

3.2 Preliminary matters: Story and time in *Die Vermessung der Welt*

The goal of this chapter is to show that *Vermessung* is a postmodern historical novel that can be characterized as a work of postcolonial and cultural revisionism. In this respect, I intend to cover the following subjects: the novel's thematic elements, its characteristics as a work of postmodernism and its characteristics and classification as an historical novel, ending with some comments on the discursive themes of the novel. It is useful, however, to begin with a brief description of the novel's narrative structure and devices which underpin its thematic elements and are an important part of what makes the novel so entertaining.

The exaggeration and excess used to describe the main characters and a particularly lively use of time, where extensive episodic flashbacks from the lives of Humboldt and Gauß are embedded into a frame story, the narrated time of which covers only three days, are not only important structural elements; they are also extremely funny. The flashbacks are crucial for the novel's coherence since the comic highpoint of the plot, the seance scene deep in the early hours of Gauß's second night in Berlin, cannot be understood without them.

In September 1828, at Humboldt's invitation, Gauß leaves Göttingen accompanied by his son Eugen to attend the German scientific congress in Berlin.⁶⁶ The two arrive in Berlin late the next day and are received by Humboldt as his guests. This is the first time Gauß and Humboldt have met and the congress will take place the next day. The post-Napoleonic repression of anti-government agitation in Prussia continues unabated. On the morning of the congress, Eugen, goaded and humiliated by his father in front of Humboldt, runs off and manages to get himself arrested in a political meeting of students. Meanwhile, Humboldt and Gauß are being feted by Berlin society as Germany's preeminent scientist and mathematician. When, late at night, they receive news of Eugen's arrest, Humboldt and Gauß rush out in a mad search for the chief of police, hoping to save Eugen from prison. The climactic search for and meeting with the chief of police at a seance takes place in *Die Geister*, the third to last

⁶⁶ Unless otherwise indicated, references to Humboldt, Gauß and Eugen are to the fictionalized characters in *Vermessung*.

chapter. The last chapter, which is something of an epilogue, brings closure to the story of Eugen, who goes into exile in America. Except for the fact that the real Eugen Gauß did emigrate to the United States, the anecdote is entirely fictional.

Gauß and Humboldt are cranky middle-aged men when they appear at the beginning of the novel and the reader will learn that both are disappointed that their best years are past. Gauß uses Eugen as a convenient scapegoat for his own ill humour and ridicules his son's romanticism: "Der da schreibe Gedichte. Gauß wies mit dem Kinn auf Eugen" (*Vermessung*, 222). Humboldt consoles himself with the prestige of his past accomplishments as a scientist and explorer and fills the honorary post of Chamberlain in the stultifying atmosphere of the court in Berlin. Both men are portrayed as highly eccentric. Gauß is a genius risen from poverty who is contemptuous of authority and anyone less intelligent than himself (i.e. just about everyone). He will usually say what he really thinks, a device which allows the character to insult people constantly to great comic effect.⁶⁷ Humboldt comes from an aristocratic Prussian family and has borne the weight of a rivalry with his sadistic brother Wilhelm his whole life. The explorer is portrayed as something of a cross between Hindenburg and Don Quixote (Kehlmann 2005b, 15), a humourless, obsessive man who wears his Prussian uniform and shaves daily in the jungle. When we meet him, he is followed around by a secretary who, upon command, takes down his words for posterity. These and other such characteristics of Humboldt are literary exaggerations that also contribute to the comic effect of the novel.

The novel is structured around the device of presenting characters in comic pairings. Kehlmann has said that he adopted the character pair Humboldt/Bonpland from literary models such as Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson or Waldorf and Statler, the cranky old codgers from the TV show *The Muppets* (Kehlmann 2005b, 16). In reality, the historical Humboldt and Bonpland were almost always accompanied by other people in their travels, but isolating them as a conniving, fighting pair highlights the satiric nature of the work by playing off Humboldt against his cultural opposite (Kehlmann

⁶⁷ He will tell Wilhelm von Humboldt, for example, that the study of linguistics is for people without the intelligence for mathematics and then doubles the insult by mistaking him for his brother Alexander, asking him how his travels are going.

2005b, 16f). Each biographical anecdote in the novel is constructed around this dramatic technique of highlighting the relationship and conflicts of one character pair or another: Humboldt and Bonpland, Alexander and his brother Wilhelm, Gauß and Eugen, Gauß and his wife Johanna (and later Minna). On a more general level, the entire novel is constructed around the pair of opposites Humboldt/Gauß, a trope used to highlight the limitations of Enlightenment rationalism (a theme to be explored in the next section). Even as the novel develops in separate biographical sections, long before they meet, a narrative thread links the two as each is constantly confronted with news about the other.

The first chapter, *Die Reise*, which concerns the trip to Berlin and first meeting with Humboldt, is written from the personal perspective of Gauß and highlights the character of the mathematician and his relationship with Eugen. The second chapter, however, *Das Meer*, is not part of the frame narrative but a biographical flashback which tells Humboldt's story from his childhood to his arrival in South America. Similarly, the third chapter flashes back to Gauß's origins and childhood and the novel continues in this way, alternating between the lives of the two protagonists, until we are back in Berlin and return to the frame story with Gauß eating breakfast in Humboldt's residence the day after his arrival. These are not biographies as such. The chapters are mere biographical episodes, anecdotes which are either pure fiction or highly fictionalized accounts of events from the lives of the two historical figures. They are all comic in tone and there is no indication that any episode is more important than any other. The episodic nature of the novel as a whole is very entertaining and the reader begins to look forward to picking up the story of each of the main characters in turn.

In piecing together these episodes, Kehlmann makes effective use of ellipses. Rather than a complete biography, the episodes present unfinished excerpts from the protagonists' lives as the narrative leaps from one moment and character to another. *Der Fluß*, for example, finishes with Humboldt and his associate Bonpland, their boat gone, sheltering near a crocodile on the banks of the Orinoco while a horrific storm rages about them. How will they escape? Yet, the next time we "catch up with them" - such is the effect of the leap in time and place - they are camped at the foot of Chimborazo which they will climb the next day. The effect is strongly reminiscent of serial movies where time is fluid and, as in film, each chapter is composed of a sequence of scenes where time slows to the speed of the drama. *Die Hauptstadt*, the last of the

biographical episodes, sees Humboldt in New Mexico and then Washington. It ends with President Jefferson asking Humboldt whether he is now returning to Berlin. No, he is going to Paris. Berlin is a dreadful place and he will never return there. In the very next chapter and sentence, Gauß is having breakfast in Humboldt's Berlin residence. This ellipsis covers a period of over 20 years and speaks eloquently about where Humboldt is in his life.

Narrative distance, which varies according to the character being portrayed, is also an important device. Gauß's biographical episodes are told from a personal perspective with the emotional, internal life of the character being highlighted. The Humboldt anecdotes are narrated with the distance appropriate to the ironic treatment of the character and the very first paragraph of the Humboldt story in *Das Meer* sets this ironic tone. In fact, the Humboldt story carries the satire of *Vermessung* which is aimed at the world and culture from which he emerged.⁶⁸ There is also an issue of class distinctions, with aristocratic and cultural elites as well as figures of authority given satiric treatment. Gauß is not an ironic character as such and is sometimes treated without any irony at all. Much of his first biographical episode, *Der Lehrer*, concerns how, as a small child, he begins to understand that most people are sad because the world is illusionary and unbearable. The comedy of the Gauß story resides in how this genius relates to other people and how, living in his own mind, he is disconnected from the world around him (Costagli, 262). Humboldt, on the other hand, is a comic character because of his obsessive and eccentric personality as both witnessed and endured by his travelling companion, the Frenchman Aimé Bonpland.

Die Geister is the climactic episode where the two protagonists are united by a common goal of saving Eugen from prison. They do this very badly. The episode is written in the form of farce, the comic effect of which stems from already familiar comic themes repeating themselves and Gauß's contemptuous frankness where diplomacy would seem to be called for. Despite their apparent failure to help Eugen, both men end the night strangely elated and looking forward to pursuing their cherished scientific goals in the future. Closure in respect of the Humboldt/Gauß relationship, which has grown to dominate the novel, is achieved in the penultimate chapter, *Die Steppe*. A bond has now been established between the two stemming

⁶⁸ Kehlmann compares the different perspectives from which he treated the two main characters in the FAZ interview (Kehlmann 2006, 29).

from gratitude (Humboldt has indeed saved Eugen from prison) and shared experience. Gauß can accept that time and science are passing them by - “Unser Erfinder hat genug von uns” (*Vermessung*, 292) - but Humboldt does not fully grasp this and now appears rather a tragic than a satiric figure (Kehlmann 2006, 29). The protagonists, each pursuing his own goals, seem to be communicating over a great distance in telepathic form. In the manner of classical comedy, this constitutes a resolution between the two who have thus overcome their divergent worldviews and origins.

It should also be noted that, if the Eugen story constitutes the frame of the novel, then *Die Steppe* is a flash forward and breaks the temporal pattern previously established. I shall return to this in the discussion of certain formal aspects of *Vermessung* in section 3.6 below.

3.3 Thematic elements

At its core, *Vermessung* is a postmodern critique of the Enlightenment expressed through the competing visions of Humboldt and Gauß.⁶⁹ The novel highlights the satiric treatment of the Enlightenment in its specifically German form, Weimar classicism, and the debunking of the myth-building inherent in the creation of national icons such as Alexander and Wilhelm von Humboldt. By the time Humboldt and Gauß meet in Berlin, the Enlightenment had run its course and culminated historically in political and social revolutions in America and France. The historical background is omnipresent in the novel. As members of the older generation, Humboldt and Gauß represent Enlightenment thought and values in their various forms and social expressions, but a new Romantic movement has taken hold in Europe, personified in the person of Eugen, an avid reader of Jahn’s *Die deutsche Turnkunst*. Indeed, Romanticism and the Enlightenment had coexisted for some time and even the youthful Humboldt, who was familiar with de la Mettrie’s *L’homme machine*, was also made to read the gothic stories then coming into fashion.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Analyses of the critique presented by the novel may be found in Pizer 2010, Kovaloski 2010, and Costagli 2012.

⁷⁰ The family’s major-domo Kunth, responsible for the brothers’ education, remarks in this respect: “die Begegnung mit dem Dunkel sei Teil des Heranwachsens, wer metaphysische Angst nicht kenne, werde nie ein deutscher Mann.” (*Vermessung*, 21) Such ironic statements underscore the use of the *Unheimlich* as a counterpoint to rationalism.

De Tocqueville saw the Enlightenment as focusing attention on the real and visible world and creating a fascination with nature, whereas in the coming age thought would become fixed upon the future of mankind.⁷¹ This analysis sums up the dichotomy between Kehlmann's two protagonists. Humboldt obsessively measures and catalogues the natural world while Gauß is future-oriented (Costagli, 262), envisaging a better future where, of necessity, people will even be a little more intelligent (*Vermessung*, 153). The Enlightenment critique is embedded in the dialectical treatment of Humboldt and Gauß, a prolonged metaphor contrasting a questionable rationalism incarnated by the former with the latter's visionary intuitions leading him to the boundaries of the visible world. Gauß even sees himself as akin to "ein Magier der dunklen Zeit ... wie ein Alchimist auf einem alten Kupferstich" (*Vermessung*, 273).

The difference between their views is neatly expressed in a conversation between Gauß and Humboldt just after the narrative returns to the frame story and Berlin (*Vermessung*, 219-220). The subject is political tyranny and Gauß, who has been working with mortality statistics, asserts that all men must necessarily follow the same path: "Die wahren Tyrannen seien die Naturgesetze." Humboldt rejoins that it is reason that shapes the laws of nature. "Der alte kantische Unsinn" is Gauß's response. Space is curved, time is malleable, and the world may be computed but not really known. How far he is now from the time of his youth when, having just completed the *Disquisitiones*, he brings the aged Kant a copy of his book. He had delved so deeply into the nature of numbers that he thought he saw hidden inconsistencies there, as if God had been negligent (*Vermessung* 88). At the heart of pure science, Gauß is now far from the rational and visible world. *The Critique of Pure Reason*, he tells Kant, is incorrect because Euclidean space does not exist. It is rather "eine Fiktion, ein schöner Traum. Die Wahrheit sei sehr unheimlich" (*Vermessung* 95). Critics have identified this passage as a key to the novel (Costagli 2012, 271; Anderson 2008, 63), the irony of which is underscored by Kant's dementia. *Unheimlich* and *Traum* are the operative words, with both ontological and aesthetic meanings. A thread of unreal occurrences, dreamlike irreality and magic storytelling weave through the novel, manifesting the penetrable boundaries of the real (Costagli, 269). Kehlmann calls this style of narration "gebrochener Realismus" (Kehlmann 2007, 20) and it is applied in different ways to both protagonists.

⁷¹ From *Democracy in America* as described in Hayden White 1973, 198.

Gauß is an Enlightenment type, iconoclastic in the face of established authority and a religious skeptic. Seriously considering suicide at one point, he plans, if he is accused at the final judgment, to rebuke God for the obvious faults and weaknesses in the Creation (*Vermessung*, 99). One senses that his humble beginnings only increase the disdain he feels for the political and cultural elite, be it his patron, the Duke of Braunschweig, or Goethe, “der Esel ... der sich anmaße Newtons Theorie des Lichts zu korrigieren” (*Vermessung*, 158). He discovers the *Unheimlich* at the core of his scientific work and simply accepts it for what it is.

Humboldt, on the other hand, is a parody of an Enlightenment icon and the manner in which his character and such other Enlightenment icons are mocked underlines the *Ideologiekritik* central to the novel. At the core of the satire is Weimar classicism, the largely aesthetic and philosophical movement contemporaneous with great political upheavals in Europe, a movement considered central to German cultural history. Kehlmann defines the content of *Vermessung* not only as “eine satirisch, spielerische Auseinandersetzung” with the nature of *Deutschseins* but “auch natürlich mit dem, was man ganz unironisch, die große deutsche Kultur nennen kann” (Kehlmann 2006, 27). His satire is aimed at the image of an elitist, neo-classical coterie imbued with its own importance and held up as a model for Germans. This is summed up in the scene where Goethe (presented throughout the novel as a fool) tells Humboldt that he will be their ambassador overseas with the mission of disproving the repugnant (*abstoßende*) theory that the earth has a molten centre. Almost the whole Weimar group is nearby in hushed conversation amid the Roman statuary of the many-coloured room. Wilhelm holds forth on blank verse to Wieland while Schiller yawns surreptitiously (*Vermessung*, 36-37).

The satire takes two forms. The first is an unabashed use of stereotypes to mock the German - or rather Prussian - character, including its stiffness, obsessiveness and lack of humour.⁷² The second satirical technique is the use of South America as a foil for Humboldt’s Enlightenment ideology. On the Orinoco in particular, the narrative sees Humboldt’s

⁷² This goes as far as Bonpland making a disparaging remark about German humour to which an insulted Humboldt replies stiffly that this criticism is unfair. “Ein Preuße könne sehr wohl lachen. In Preußen werde viel gelacht.” (*Vermessung*, 111)

rationalism confronted and confounded everywhere by signs of the unreal⁷³. Humboldt's incapacity even in this environment to shake off his Prussian character is carried to such an extreme as to put into question the ideology he represents (Costagli 2012, 270-271). This is perhaps best expressed by the missionary Pater Zea when he describes the primeval jungle as a place where, in essence, the Enlightenment view of the cosmos does not exist (Anderson 2008, 63) and, instead, one experiences minuscule displacements of reality when the world steps momentarily into the unreal (*Vermessung*, 117). The Brombacher anecdote is a high point in this respect. Brombacher is a Saxon who appears suddenly out of the bush after Humboldt and Bonpland have spent a day ingesting curare to test its effects. He is off to see the world and declines the invitation to join their group because "Deutsche treffe man ohnehin daheim in Mengen" (*Vermessung*, 133). Neither Humboldt nor the reader is able to determine whether Brombacher is an hallucination.

Parallel to its satire of the Enlightenment, the novel explores themes of family and relationships in the stories of both of the main protagonists. These themes are progressively foregrounded in the final chapters as the social satire wanes. These chapters depict the growing attachment of Humboldt and Gauß and how the two aging men react to their diminishing roles as leaders of a scientific elite. Although a complicated sibling rivalry links Alexander with his brother Wilhelm,⁷⁴ his story contains no other attachments. His aversion to female sexuality is highlighted throughout and his homosexuality is confirmed in a conversation with his brother late in the novel.⁷⁵ With Gauß, on the other hand, relationships with women and Eugen define much of his character and these relationships are central to his story. In the final chapter, *Der Baum*, as Eugen sails into exile, he remarks to his travelling companion "sein Vater habe vieles geliebt, bloß nicht ihn" (*Vermessung* 300). Now Eugen

⁷³ For example, a parrot that speaks an extinct language, reflections in the water of objects that are not there, a flying saucer which follows the boat for a while.

⁷⁴ "jetzt sind es wieder, wie im Grunde immer schon, nur wir beide ... wir mußten begreifen, daß das eigentliche Ziel unserer Bemühungen nicht der Kosmos, sondern bloß der andere war" writes Wilhelm to Alexander late in the novel (*Vermessung*, 266), just as the latter had already written such sentiments to his brother in a letter he never sent (*Vermessung*, 33-34).

⁷⁵ This is consistent with the evolution of Humboldt historiography in which, until the 1990s when his homosexuality received general scholarly acceptance, he was seen as a largely asexual figure who had sacrificed his affections for the pursuit of science (Rupke 2008, 197).

achieves renewal because circumstances have freed him from his father's overpowering presence.

In the magazine's interview with Kehlmann, *Spiegel* was dismissive of this ending, calling it disappointing (Kehlmann 2005a,178). Surely this is a misreading of *Vermessung*. *Der Baum* ties together many thematic strands. The scene for which the chapter is named points back to Humboldt's departure for Latin America and his communion with the *Drachenbaum*. Eugen appears after all to be very much like his father. Moreover, the *Umheimlich* is pointedly not present in the chapter, signifying a break with the earlier parts of the novel.⁷⁶ The last word "Amerika" also plays a unifying role. It points forward to the great uncharted frontier and, from a literary point of view, encompasses both the Enlightenment and the Romanticism of Gauß father and son.⁷⁷

3.4 *Die Vermessung der Welt* as a work of postmodernism

Vermessung has been classified as a work of historical metafiction whose themes and literary strategies harken back to a group of postmodern historical novels which appeared in Germany in the 1980s and included *Schrecken* and *Marbot* as well as Patrick Süskind's *Das Parfum* (Costagli 2012). The term historical metafiction as used here refers to the phrase coined by Linda Hutcheon. According to this analysis, *Vermessung* shares a number of defining characteristics with this group of novels such as a playful manipulation of time, intertextuality and the non-observance of historical truth. These novels also share a playful distortion of the traditional historical novel already evident in Eco's *Il nome della rosa* (Costagli 2012, 262-265).

The analytical tools developed by Hutcheon and other theorists of postmodernism can be usefully applied to *Vermessung*. Essentially subversive and iconoclastic, the novel's debunking of Weimar classicism and the Enlightenment manifests the "historical

⁷⁶ "In einer Nacht glaubte Eugen ein Flackern in der Ferne zu sehen, aber der Kapitän riet ihm, nicht darauf zu achten, das Meer schicke Trugbilder, manchmal scheine es zu träumen wie ein Mensch." (*Vermessung* 301)

⁷⁷ "America is not exclusively the product of Reason-not even in the area of legend. Behind its neo-classical façade, (it) is a nation sustained by a sentimental and romantic dream, the dream of an escape from culture and a renewal of youth." Leslie Fiedler 1982, 37.

consciousness mixed with an ironic sense of critical distance” characteristic of postmodern parody (Hutcheon 1988, 201). *Vermessung* makes extensive use of “parodic echoes” that will be readily familiar to German readers who thereby serve as postmodern “echo-chambers” of the nation’s cultural history and memory.⁷⁸ The fictional Humboldt is a parodic reconstruction of the historical figure, just as the parodic episodes in the novel are taken from the real Humboldt’s travel reports.⁷⁹ The novel parodies Goethe in an ironic commentary on high German culture and, in another register, transforms the popular adventure narrative into high comedy. The postmodernist ethos of *Vermessung* is also evident in its crossing of the boundaries between literary genres and, importantly, between fiction and non-fiction as well. From its very opening paragraph - a simple statement of historical fact followed by an obviously fictional look into Gauß’s inner life - *Vermessung* alternates between the genres of history, fiction and biography. This is the meaning of Kehlmann’s statement: “Ich wollte schreiben wie ein verrückt gewordener Historiker” (Kehlmann 2006).

Intertextuality and allusion are key strategies of the novel. Humboldt’s trip up the Orinoco takes on additional meaning with repeated allusions to the legend of Aguirre and to magic realism through the antics of his rowers. The chapter *Der Garten*, a prolonged reference to *Das Schloss* (Anderson 2007), is inspired by a journal entry of the historical Gauß recording that, while in the field surveying, he spent a particularly unpleasant night in the house of one Baron von der Ohe zur Ohe (Rickes 2007, 92). Kehlmann transforms the event into what he calls a Kafka reversal (Kehlmann 2007, 33-35). It stands out in the sequence of biographical episodes by its obscurity and strangeness.⁸⁰ The reference is to K., the protagonist of Kafka’s novel, to whose profession of land surveyor the novel alludes. At the same time, the garden points to the lush and magical jungle that Humboldt experiences exploring the Orinoco.

⁷⁸ (Nünning 1999, 130) For his argumentation on postmodern parody, Nünning uses the example of English novels, but the concepts apply readily to *Vermessung* as well. The concept of the cultural echo chamber is taken from Barthes.

⁷⁹ Alexander von Humboldt, *Reise in die Äquinoktialgegenden des Neuen Kontinents*. Clearly, the principal episodes of Humboldt’s travels in the Americas as depicted in the novel are based on the historical record, for which the real Humboldt’s travel reports are an essential source (cf. Müller-Völkl et al. 2009, 86-99). However, they have been parodied and fictionalized by Kehlmann for the purpose of satire and in order to present the novel’s central messages.

⁸⁰ The Baron may be a strange version of God, sheltering for some reason in this magical garden (Rickes 2007, 94-95; Anderson 2008, 66).

In a certain sense, the novel as a whole is a reversal in which the cultural icon Humboldt is recast subversively in terms of a Pop ethos. The heroic is replaced by the comic. The intrepid explorer is transformed into a character who sees ghosts, hallucinates, suffers sexual indignities, is followed by a spaceship, muddles riotously through a world he cannot understand and yet is infected by the magic of his surroundings. The novel is full of carefully set up jokes and running gags.⁸¹ It has a visual, cinematographic feel and its pacing is cleverly modulated. Pacing, irony, an iconoclastic and airy style and the restating of its historical mythology in contemporary terms endow the novel with an aura of popular culture, making it accessible and entertaining. *Vermessung* thereby achieves the postmodern crossing of cultural boundaries.⁸²

The novel is very playful - Kehlmann often describes it as *spielerisch* - and exhibits what Umberto Eco identified as one of the principal characteristics of postmodernism: the game of irony and metalinguistic play (Eco 1988, 73-83). The metafictional play of the novel is very engaging, with the characters commenting critically about historical novels and the author himself. In a highpoint of ironic metafiction, Gauß is made to say that two hundred years hence any blockhead would be able to invent nonsense to make fun of him, that he would become the “Clown der Zukunft” (*Vermessung*, 9). Later Humboldt tells Gauß: “Künstler hielten Abweichungen für eine Stärke, aber Erfundenes verwirre die Menschen, Stilisierung verfälsche die Welt.” (*Vermessung*, 221)

Spielerisch may also be used to describe the novel’s manipulation of time as exemplified by Gauß’s repeated visionary pronouncements which simply describe aspects of the reader’s present. “(Eines Tages) würde jeder fliegen als wäre es normal” comments the young Gauß in Pilâtre’s balloon (*Vermessung*, 66). Such visions and comments constitute ironic displacements of time not unlike the small displacements of reality in the magic realism of Pater Zea’s primeval jungle. The effect is to bring immediacy to the narration. The novel also contains anachronisms - recall Daguerre’s presence at Humboldt’s meeting with Gauß - that

⁸¹ While in a beer hall, Eugen scribbles poetry on a piece of paper on the other side of which he will later write a note informing his father of his arrest. Delivered to Humboldt’s residence in the middle of the night, the Baron will read the poem rather than the note, exclaiming how bad it is. All this ties in to the running gag of Eugen’s romanticism.

⁸² Kehlmann has said in interview that Germans are just beginning to get over the belief that only high culture counts (Harding 2006, 4).

are impossible and point to its fictionality. Moreover, the array of cultural stereotypes around which the characters of Humboldt and Bonpland are created have little relevance to their historical period and everything to do with the modern, popular aura which pervades the novel. All these characteristics are reflections of a postmodern aesthetic.

Finally, it is revealing to look at another pivotal postmodern intertext which ties together various thematic strands. This is in the chapter *Die Höhle*, when Humboldt enters the cave of the dead and encounters the spirit of his mother for the first time. The episode begins with Humboldt exasperated by his Indian guides' refusal to enter the cave:

Der Führer lehnte ab. Dieser Platz sei nicht gut! Und überhaupt, was habe man hier zu suchen, der Mensch gehöre ans Licht.

Schön gesagt, brüllte Bonpland.

Licht, rief Humboldt, das sei nicht Helligkeit, sondern Wissen! (*Vermessung*, 72)

It is later, after Humboldt and Bonpland light their torches to enter the darker parts of the cave, that he sees his mother's spirit. The above exchange is a satiric reference to the cliché of light and darkness used to describe the Enlightenment. I also read this scene as a parody of Diderot's metaphor of the cave in his "Éloge de Richardson."⁸³ The metaphor helps define one of the themes of the novel, namely the inadequacies of Enlightenment rationality fully to analyze the conflicts inherent in man's psyche, the inner corollary of the chaos of nature.⁸⁴

3.5 *Die Vermessung der Welt* as an historical novel

Around a minimalist framework of historical events and personages, *Vermessung* presents reworked, fictionalized characters and a loose sequence of anecdotes often trivial in nature. The novel is anything but trivial, however. It explores the boundary between fact and fiction, questions through parody the validity of historical sources and postulates the primacy of art in establishing the facticity of the work. The fictional transformation of the historical record is

⁸³ "C'est lui (Richardson) qui porte le flambeau au fond de la caverne ; ... Il souffle sur le fantôme sublime qui se présente à l'entrée de la caverne ; et le more hydeux qu'il masquoit, s'aperçoit." Œuvres de Denis Diderot, tome IX. Paris : Deterville, 1800. 217. Web. November 2014.

⁸⁴ Leslie Fiedler analyzes the meaning of Diderot's metaphor of the cave as follows: "The (modern) novel has, in the course of its search for inwardness, managed to save the mythic in an age of prose and science. ... Surely the 'hideous Moor' is a striking symbol of the demonic in ourselves, which the Enlightenment inadvertently discovered in its quest for light." (Fiedler 1982, 40)

justified by the author both for its dramatic content and because reality must sometimes be manipulated in the search for truth. That is to say that *Vermessung*, in typical postmodern fashion, is double coded and presents a reworking of history in the form of a pervasive subtext.⁸⁵ Comic stereotypes and satire are anti-myths, an act of “levelling.” The *Ideologiekritik* transforms *Vermessung* into a revisionist historical novel according to the categorization of Ansgar Nünning. The revisionism operates on two levels. It raises questions about the meaning of the Enlightenment in German culture and it conflates Humboldt’s explorations with the European colonization of the Americas.⁸⁶

Through the caricature of Humboldt, who is unable to understand the worlds through which he travels, let alone communicate with the other, *Vermessung* debunks the mythology of the Enlightenment and constitutes a critical revision of the reception of Weimar classicism (Marx 2008, 179). It depicts its proponents as a small provincial elite defined by its idealist and aesthetic theories. The novel questions the role of the Weimar Enlightenment as the centrepiece of an enlightened German culture. Shaken by learning that 20,000 people were sacrificed for the dedication of the *templo mayor* in Mexico City, Humboldt states: “So viel Zivilisation und so viel Grausamkeit ... Was für eine Paarung! Gleichsam der Gegensatz zu allem, wofür Deutschland stehe.” (*Vermessung*, 208) Kehlmann has underscored this point in interviews, stating that Germany’s great classical culture did not prevent the subsequent Nazi crimes (Kehlmann 2005a, 178). Thus, the novel’s revisionism has contemporary signification.

Vermessung’s anti-colonial revisionism is also omnipresent. Analysts have noted how Humboldt’s comportment during his explorations corresponds to a Eurocentric perception of the other (Marx 2008, 180) and how his character is an advocate of “the Enlightenment telos of dominion over nature and indigenous peoples” (Pizer 2010, 133). That Goethe sends him as Weimar’s ambassador overseas is essentially the same narrative. The novel abounds in satiric episodes which depict the effects of Spanish colonialism: the ill-treatment of natives in Pater

⁸⁵ These various themes are discussed by the author and numerous critics. See, for example : Kehlmann 2005a and 2005b, Costagli 2012, Marx 2008.

⁸⁶ Schabert notes the revisionist potential of fictional biography with regard to history and quotes Robert Graves to that effect: “If I feel convinced that something very different happened, yet cannot prove it, a suggested restoration in fictional form is tempting.” (Schabert 1990, 62 ; listed in the bibliography under *Marbot*)

Zea's mission, the disappearance of a tribe whose language is now spoken only by a parrot, how the great grandson of the last Aztec king is now a grandee of Spain, and so on.

The most satiric example of the colonial discourse of Enlightenment comes at the very end of the biographical flashbacks, when Humboldt agrees to furnish President Jefferson the information he wants about Spanish military and administrative dispositions. Throughout the novel, Humboldt fends off accusations of being a Prussian or Spanish spy. He turns out to be an accomplice of American imperialism, then in its formative stage of expansion across the continent. At the very least, this is an act of ingratitude towards both the Spanish authorities who allowed him access to the empire and to the Mexicans who have just welcomed him as a hero, and from whom the United States will detach some of its most important territories. Readers of *Vermessung* will generally be aware of this history of American conquest and be able to decode the irony. It is all the more satirical that the scene is played out between two individuals who are considered to be among the most distinguished representatives of Enlightenment thought.

Humboldt becomes more and more famous as *Vermessung* progresses. The recurrent theme of celebrity questions the validity of historical sources and the origins of the Humboldt myth itself. He uses his brother as a conduit to publish articles about his travels and manipulates reporters for his own aggrandizement. He nurtures his celebrity to the exclusion of his companion Bonpland and this becomes a running gag in the novel. Bonpland, who does not know how to use journalists to shape his image, complains bitterly and constantly that his role in the expedition is ignored by everyone. The gag reaches its climax with questions from Gauß and Eugen as to who this Bonpland person is anyways. The theme of media manipulation and the manufacture of celebrity is a postmodern anachronism inserted into the novel to satirize the Humboldt myth as a human construct rather than an objective historical "fact." This is nowhere more clearly depicted than when Humboldt finds in a Mexico City market a cheap illustrated pamphlet recounting his own explorations. The reference to his biography as pulp literature reflects the fact that most biographies of the real Alexander von Humboldt are not written by academics but by science popularizers and journalists (Rupke 2008, 19).

As his fame spreads, fictional reporters begin to follow the fictional Humboldt around watching him “explore” and measure, letting him dictate what he expects them to write. In a later conversation with Gauß he will quote from one of these fictional books that his “friend” Simon Bolivar called him “den wahren Entdecker Südamerikas” (*Vermessung*, 219). This description of Humboldt has obvious mythic properties. That the oft-repeated phrase is quoted from a fictional book sustains the theme of the problematic boundary between historical fact and fiction. In the same vein, Humboldt manipulates his own diary entries to sustain a heroic image of himself, omitting to mention, for example, that he had to soak his feet to rid himself of sand fleas. The following is spoken without irony on his part: “Er habe, sagte Humboldt, viel über die Regeln des Ruhmes nachgedacht. Einen Mann, von dem bekannt sei, daß unter seinen Zehennägeln Flöhe gelebt hätten, nehme keiner mehr ernst.” (*Vermessung*, 112).

3.6 Comparison with a “conventional” historical novel: Chimborazo

Carlos Montúfar was a young Bolivian who accompanied Humboldt and Bonpland on many of their travels in South America and was with them during the ascent of Chimborazo. Kehlmann did not include him as a character in *Vermessung* because the dramatic tension of the novel demanded that Humboldt and Bonpland act as a pair. Kehlmann explains this deformation of the historical record in “Wo ist Carlos Montúfar?”, one of the articles where he lays out his poetics of the historical novel. For example, one device used throughout *Vermessung* is the strategy of indirect speech, the German *Konjunktiv I*. Kehlmann has said that direct speech often trivializes historical fiction (Kehlmann 2006, 32). The device of indirect speech mimics the academic language of historical writing, but this technique of “Pseudosachlichkeit,” of creating a “Scheindistanz” (Kehlmann 2007, 21), clearly also points to the fictionality of the story. It is, therefore, well suited to the postmodern form.

By comparison, *Der Entdecker* is a conventional historical novel about Humboldt’s South American travels published in 2001.⁸⁷ It is conceived as an adventure narrative, as evidenced by its introductory chapter which ends with Humboldt’s ship catching a favourable wind westwards from Tenerife towards “die Ränder der bekannten Welt. Und wo nie zuvor jemand

⁸⁷ Matthias Gerwald. *Der Entdecker : Historischer Roman über Alexander von Humboldt*. Bergisch Gladbach: Bastei Lübbe, 2001.

war, dort wollen Sie hin. Das Abenteuer kann beginnen.” (*Entdecker* 15) Can one really speak of the edge of the known world 300 years after the start of Spanish colonization? The triviality of this formulation and its hidden discourse of European domination make this novel a foil for analyzing aspects of *Vermessung*.⁸⁸

Entdecker (351-353) also contains a chapter on the Chimborazo climb but this time Carlos Montúfar is present. In the conventional manner, Gerwald uses direct speech and thought which often gives his novel a trivial tone, as Kehlmann suggested it could. The climb up Chimborazo is arduous. Carlos talks about feeling like a little spot in a giant, hostile painting. Bonpland and Humboldt reminisce about the difficulties they had climbing the volcano on Tenerife. Humboldt heroically goes first because there is a risk of landslides. They move at a snail’s pace until the climax high up when the clouds dissipate and they see Quito in the valley and mountain peaks all around. Humboldt reflects that all this was once the land of the Incas who saw the same fog as he does, but, “Für sie hatte alles besondere religiöse Bedeutung. Für uns Europäer ist es bloß Natur.”

Der Berg, the Chimborazo episode in *Vermessung*, is completely different. It pursues the depiction of the relationship between Humboldt and Bonpland and contains some of the novel’s few moments of sustained narration from the latter’s perspective. Like Aguirre, he is at times near madness from illness and the rigours of following the obdurate Humboldt in his adventures. As they climb, they develop altitude sickness and begin hallucinating, all the while carrying on a conversation that is less and less coherent. Bonpland admits to Humboldt that he has had fantasies of killing him. In many ways, the chapter is the climax of their relationship as their South American travels are coming to an end.

Kehlmann’s *Der Berg* does not simply serve as a means of reproducing a story from Humboldt’s travel reports. The problematization of the relation between narration and historical sources lies at the heart of this chapter recounting the ascent of Chimborazo. Kehlmann asserts that the real Humboldt’s description of the ascent ignores the debilitating effects of altitude on climbers and is no less fictional than his own. On the contrary, Kehlmann defends his text as a work of mountaineering realism (Kehlmann 2005b, 20-21). He thus

⁸⁸ In fact, it has been used for that purpose in a teaching guide on Kehlmann’s novel (see Claudia Müller-Völkl, et al 2009).

asserts the primacy of literary over historical authenticity and the necessity of adjusting reality in the search for truth including, of course, the excising of Carlos Montúfar from the narrative. The chapter parodies Humboldt's own report of the climb (Costagli 2012, 276), just as the anecdotes of Humboldt's travels taken together parody exploration narratives.

These comments can be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to *Entdecker*. For Kehlmann, the historical Humboldt's account of his ascent of Chimborazo is written in a tone of superiority typical of European conquest narratives (Kehlmann 2005b, 20), a tone also found in Gerwald's novel as exemplified in Humboldt's reflections on the difference between Inca and European concepts of nature. *Entdecker* works in only one register, that of the heroic adventure, whereas Kehlmann's parody is by definition double coded. Even readers not familiar with the text being parodied will recognize the satiric tone of the Chimborazo chapter (Costagli 2012, 276). *Vermessung* illustrates how postmodernism has expanded the boundaries of this novelistic genre. Paradoxically, the use of indirect speech invests the narration with considerable immediacy. The "verrückt gewordener Historiker" offers up a story that straddles the frontier between historical fact and fiction, clearly fictional and comic yet close enough to reality to make those with a vested interest in the Humboldt myth uneasy.

3.7 The discursive framework of the novel

The historical format is a source of great richness in *Vermessung*. The satire is accessible to all readers, but those with an understanding of the historical and cultural context which underpins the plot will have a keener sense of the double coding inherent in the novel. For example, the reaction of various characters to Napoleon as a metonymy for the Enlightenment underscores differing views of the history of the period: the Prussian border guard is horrified at the mere mention of his name; the Prussian aristocrat Humboldt has never swallowed how Napoleon insulted him; and Gauß, the free thinker from a poor background, boasts that it was because of his presence in Göttingen that Napoleon refrained from bombarding the town. In this way, competing historical discourses enter the novel as irony.

To classify *Vermessung* as a work of historical and cultural revisionism positions the novel's political discourse within the broader postmodern phenomenon of a pluralistic, ex-centric point of view which questions the homogeneous monolith of western history. The

Enlightenment, as it has come down to the present as a fact of history, is shown to be a cultural artifact that is (to borrow Hutcheon's language) both a system of knowledge and a discourse of manipulation. While the Enlightenment is not a necessary precondition for colonialism - Puritanism and the inquisition were also agents of the colonization of North and South America - it was the ideology of capitalism in full economic and cultural expansion. Exploration, surveying, the view of science as enabling the exploitation of natural wealth go hand in hand with European conquest.

The Humboldt in *Vermessung* is the projection of this ideology. The irony of the character lies in the image of a Prussian aristocrat and chamberlain of the court in Berlin presented as the representative of a progressive worldview, as some Humboldt scholars see him. The real Alexander von Humboldt may or may not have been a progressive thinker, prominent anti-slavery advocate, German nationalist and model for South American freedom fighters. This is largely irrelevant for our purposes because the satire of *Vermessung* is aimed at the latest version of the Humboldt myth and at those who present this myth as an antidote to what are seen as Germany's contemporary ills.⁸⁹ Kehlmann interprets the success of *Kosmos* in 2004 as reflecting an ultra-conservative longing for order and former clarity (Kehlmann 2005b, 24). The Humboldt myth changed after the reunification of Germany. He came to be portrayed as a citizen of the world and a pioneer of globalization, as a paragon of enlightenment and modernity. Most recently, postmodern cracks have begun to appear in his image and the word "myth" in respect of the Humboldt story has entered the discourse (Rupke 2008, 175-195). *Vermessung* is an example, albeit fictionalized, of this evolution.

Finally, I note the coherence of the formal and the ideological in *Vermessung*. Formally, the work presents the story of two Enlightenment figures, both opposed to the deformation of reality in the arts, that is to say, proponents of an extreme form of mimesis which, in this novel, is progressively taken over by the forms and tropes of Kehlmann's broken or magic realism. Humboldt's story is the main portal by which magic enters the novel: his mother's spirit, the unreal and hallucinatory atmosphere of the jungle and the magic narratives of his

⁸⁹ "Humboldt, der Entdecker, der Sternschauer, der Weltbürger – wenn es einen Vorzeige-Deutschen ... geben sollte in diesen düsteren Tagen, dann ihn. In diesen Zeiten, in denen Folter und Massenmorde das großartige Projekt der Aufklärung täglich annihilieren, leuchtet aus Humboldt das, was der Mensch sein kann." "Der geniale Abenteurer," Op. cit., 163.

crew. Like the Jesuit missionary Zea, who opposes the impulse of the indigenous culture to an instinctive or primal form of narrative on religious grounds, Humboldt too struggles against this culture, which is an affront to his rationalism. Gauß confronts the presence of magic in *Der Garten*, which is an excursus into the realm of the *Unheimlich*, something he can recognize in science but not in life. Then, in *Die Steppe*, the last chapter involving the two main characters, the novel is entirely taken over by magic realism as we witness the telepathic communication between them. On occasion, this telepathy even cuts into the day-to-day activities and conversations of the protagonists, as we see Gauß “conversing” telepathically with Humboldt at the moment Czar Alexander is bestowing an honour upon the latter.

Thus, it is not simply the events but the narrative form itself which carries the meaning of the novel. In his *Poetikvorlesung*, Kehlmann underlines how the clash of form and content creates the basic irony of *Vermessung*. Against the rationalism of the protagonists and their bias against narrative (*Erzählfeindlichkeit*), he uses the foil of South America and the primacy of apparently unstructured and ebullient storytelling (*das Primat des scheinbar unstrukturierten, sprudelnden Erzählens*). It is the episodic structure of the novel, the succession of quirky stories from the lives of the protagonists told without regard to their relative importance, which constitutes the novel’s *südamerikanische-* and *anti-Weimar Erzählgestus* (Kehlmann 2007, 40). Rationalism is presented as a closed system governed by a realist impulse and based on notions of order and harmony. In fact, this is the meaning of *Kosmos*. Historical writing is traditionally also governed by the same rationalist impulse and ostensibly ordered by notions of cause and effect. Cause and effect is not a motive force in *Vermessung*, which may be viewed formally as an historical anti-narrative.

My opening hypothesis in describing the plot of *Vermessung* was that Eugen’s story constituted the frame of the novel. In part, this is because the novel begins and ends with him. The frame story determines the time sequence and viewpoint of the whole, who narrates and, so to speak, takes possession of the narrative. However, the question of which story constitutes the frame becomes less important as the novel progresses because the conflict of ideas and then the resolution between Humboldt and Gauß come to dominate the whole until the narrative returns to follow Eugen into exile. *Die Geister* is a climactic moment of the novel and represents something of an epiphany for the two protagonists. Then the final chapters

provide two epilogues for the two major strands of the plot, the Humboldt/Gauß relationship, on the one hand, and Eugen's coming of age, on the other. In so doing, the time structure and ownership of the story become less clear and less important. This is the nature of unstructured ebullient storytelling. When Humboldt's crew tell each other stories, the listeners intervene, comment, protest and modify what is being told. This is akin to what is happening at the end of *Vermessung*. The presumed clarity of a rational, unambiguous approach to narrative is no longer applicable because we are no longer in that world.

4. Wolfgang Hildesheimer, *Marbot: eine Biographie*

4.1 Structure and reception of the novel

Marbot: eine Biographie was published in 1981, four years after Hildesheimer's biography *Mozart*, his most popular and commercially successful book. *Mozart* has no subtitle to indicate the kind of book it is. *Marbot*, on the other hand, which is not a biography in any normally accepted sense of the term, presents itself paratextually as "eine Biographie," supposedly presenting the life of Andrew Marbot, 1801-1830, an obscure English aristocrat and art theoretician. Another striking paratext is the portrait on the dust cover of the original Suhrkamp edition, identified as a drawing of Marbot by Eugène Delacroix.⁹⁰ The portrait is by Delacroix but represents one Baron Louis Schwiter (Weisstein 1983, 28). Andrew Marbot never existed.

Marbot is a fake biography that uses various elements of mystification to make its hero appear as a real historical figure.⁹¹ It features an ever-present biographical voice adopting the external focalization of biographical discourse and leading the reader through the life of its subject. Relevant "evidence" in the form of false documentation is adduced to support the narrative and its conclusions. The deception caused some confusion as to the nature of the book although Hildesheimer denied ever wanting to fool his readers. It also aroused the interest of narratologists who see *Marbot* as a unique literary work defying easy classification. Following Dorrit Cohn's analysis, I treat *Marbot* as a novel in the category of fictional biography, albeit of a very special type.

Adhering to the format of the two previous chapters, the discussion of *Marbot* will focus on its reception and its characteristics as a postmodern historical novel. Additional sections on biography and classification are also included. I end with my reading of the novel as an allegory of the absurd.

⁹⁰ The description reads: "Umschlagbild: Sir Andrew Marbot. Kreidelithographie von Eugène Delacroix (1827). Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale." The 1984 Suhrkamp Taschenbuch edition used for this paper has the same drawing on its cover.

⁹¹ Abramson (2005), chapter 4, presents in some detail the techniques of mystification used.

4.1.1 Preliminary matters: structure and thematic content

Marbot has been called a “vast and complicated montage” (Ryan 1992, 58) and “a complex, if not perverse, manipulation of the reader” (Cohn 1999c, 53). Both are fair assessments of the work. Its chief conceit is that of a narrator presenting himself as a biographer (I use the terms biographer and narrator interchangeably), who depicts the life of Andrew Marbot in preparation for a new, definitive edition of his writings on art. Much as Hildesheimer does in his biography of Mozart, the narrator explains his interest in the subject and addresses critically the art of writing biographies and the limitations of earlier works on Marbot. He describes at length the nature of the evidence he has uncovered that allows him to write this biography. This scholarly discourse, typical of an author seeking to establish his authority on some subject, acts as the frame within which the narrator *qua* biographer tells the story of Marbot.

To speak of frame and inner stories is to describe a structure typical of fiction but does not apply to historiography. The author of an historical work, biography included, takes responsibility for its contents. Since *Marbot* is fictional, however, the structural categories proper to fiction can be applied. Indeed, it is unavoidable to do so and this affects the reading of *Marbot*. As a novel, then, it is framed by the first person narrative of the biographer, a structure analogous to that of *Schrecken*. By convention, Marbot’s biographer does not possess complete knowledge of his subject and cannot directly access his inner life so his statements are often tentative. Working with the information at his disposal - and which he wishes to share - he describes, comments, explains, judges, hypothesizes and infers, lending the novel a distanced, scholarly tone. A large part of his discourse concerns himself as biographer: his views on biography and other biographers, his goals, how he came to possess the evidence and so on. Thereby, the biographer’s commentary becomes a self-referential narrative layer. Presumed to lack full knowledge of the subject, the narrator is unreliable and there is an intimation of competition between himself and all past (and future) biographers of Marbot.

The protagonist’s life is narrated in the third person. Set in the opening decades of the 19th century, the narrative chronicles the life of a fictional English aristocrat, the scion of a Catholic family from Northumberland ennobled by James I. An art connoisseur who keeps

notebooks about his impressions of paintings and ideas on art, Marbot is presented as a largely unknown theoretician who set down the principles of a psychological approach to art analysis nearly a century before Freud. In London and on the continent, he moves in a prestigious circle that includes some of the greatest literary, artistic and philosophical luminaries of his time. He meets and discusses art and philosophy with Blake, Crabb Robinson, Turner, de Quincy, Delacroix, von Rumohr, Schopenhauer and Leopardi, amongst others. He lives for a short time with Byron and his entourage in Italy. He also has a tumultuous personal life, beginning an incestuous relationship with his mother at the age of 19 just before leaving on his first grand tour of Europe. Returning to England after his father's death two years later, the relationship is pursued until his definitive departure in 1825. He lives out the rest of his short life mainly in Urbino where he works on his notes about art. Marbot is presumed to have shot himself with one of a pair of dueling pistols in 1830, although his body is never found.

Marbot's tutor and friend, the Jesuit priest Gerard van Rossum, publishes a heavily edited version of Marbot's writings entitled *Art and Life* a few years after his disappearance, later translated into German as *Die Kunst und das Leben*. Over time, this work becomes known to a small circle of art historians and Marbot is the subject of an 1888 biography. Now, the narrator has discovered evidence of the relationship between Marbot and his mother and this forms the basis of his understanding of the man and his work. He is convinced the link between the personal and intellectual strands of Marbot's life resides in his theory of art and contends that the incestuous relationship gave Marbot the insight that deep unconscious drives govern the human psyche, a perception he sought to apply to art, seeking the unconscious motivations which govern the process of artistic creation.

The proliferation of themes makes it difficult to establish which ones predominate or determine what the author's goals were in producing such a work. Although *Marbot* is constructed as a fake biography, Hildesheimer expected the deception to be discovered rapidly and indeed did not hide the nature of his project. Within its unusual frame, the novel features a Romantic hero and depicts a textured image of Romanticism in the first decades of the nineteenth-century, giving the novel its quality as historical fiction. It also depicts a highly unusual story of mother-son incest which governs the emotional and intellectual life of the protagonist. Despite its distanced treatment, as befits biographical discourse, *Marbot* is filled

with literary references and attempts to define the hero's life as tragedy. Moreover, a line of irony weaves through the book signaling its fictionality and pointing to a parodic reading of the novel.

4.1.2 The reception of *Marbot*⁹²

A rather cerebral book, *Marbot* appeals to a limited audience of experienced readers - "geschultern Lesern und Kunstbetrachtern" in the narrator's own words (*Marbot*, 19) - as well as a critical and scholarly audience, particularly those familiar with Hildesheimer's oeuvre. These readers would have the ability rapidly to perceive the elements of hoax and seek the author's intentions beyond the work's biographical deception. The *trompe l'œil* nature of the work was well known in literary circles even before its publication. Hildesheimer reports that he had exchanged correspondence with friends on the subject, with his literary correspondents often suggesting names of people they would like to see Marbot meet (Hildesheimer 1982a, 257). He published a summary of Marbot's life and accomplishments in *Die Zeit* in February 1980, under the title "Die Wahrheit der Unwahrheit," marking the so-called 150th anniversary of Marbot's death (Hildesheimer 1980). The editorial comment accompanying the article made it clear that his upcoming book would be a falsified biography. Still, some readers were taken in and the Daedalus book catalogue originally classified *Marbot* as biography (Abramson 2005, 123).

German press critics noted the fictionality of *Marbot* and variously defined the work as "fiktive Biographie," "Versteckspiel" and "Konstruktion" (Stanley 1993, 62-63). Typically, they focused on the content of the novel, e.g. on such thematic issues as Marbot's character, his ideas on art and the quality of the work as biography. German language reviews were largely panegyric, although their evaluations of the meaning of the novel varied considerably; it was praised by one as satire and parody and by another as a work in which the author successfully carries out his long held goal of creating truth from fiction: "Wahrheit aus Fiktion zu kondensieren" (Hamburger 1992, 95). This last quotation is from Günter Blöcker's favorable article in *FAZ* of October 31, 1981, and makes reference to Hildesheimer's 1975

⁹² Much of the information in this section is taken from Stanley 1993, 62-74.

speech “The End of Fiction.”⁹³ German reviewers who had followed Hildesheimer for years had an advantage over their English language counterparts who were less versed in his work.⁹⁴ Peter Horst Neumann’s lengthy article in *Die Zeit* (December 1981), for example, references Hildesheimer’s story “1956 - ein Pilzjahr” as a forerunner of *Marbot* and speaks of the sublime parody and irony which is found not so much in the text as secreted between the lines. An extended version of this review appears as an article in the *Text & Kritik* issue devoted to Hildesheimer (Neumann 1981 and 1986 respectively). An exception to the favourable German language reviews was Peter Wapnewski’s ironic article in *Spiegel*, which Stanley judges to be a frivolous attempt to trivialize *Marbot*.

English language press reviews also tended to be more negative. John Simon in *The New York Times* found the novel to be “smaller than the sum of its parts.”⁹⁵ J. P. Stern’s review in the *London Review of Books* (Stern 1982) gave rise to a well-known incident. Stern’s article was a witty pretense at having been fooled by the novel’s deception. Hildesheimer failed to pick up on Stern’s irony and wrote to the journal to correct the apparent error. Near the opening of the *LRB* review, in the midst of general comments about Hildesheimer’s work, Stern remarks that his search for style was “compatible with a penchant for complex and ambitious literary jokes.” Perhaps in response to this comment, Hildesheimer ended his letter to the *LRB* by saying: “In my view, it speaks for the book that the reviewer has taken *Marbot*’s existence for granted. In fact, he could have existed. My book might have begun as a joke - I don’t remember - but it became increasingly more serious. One does not work four years on a joke.”⁹⁶

The nature and meaning of *Marbot* also gave rise to scholarly commentary. Stanley (1993) provides a useful summary of the critical and scholarly work in the first decade or so after

⁹³ The full line from “The End of Fiction” reads: “the function of literature is not to turn truth into fiction but to turn fiction into truth: to condense truth out of fiction.” The original speech was given in English (Hildesheimer 1975, 111).

⁹⁴ A particularly egregious example of the limited exposure of some English language reviewers to Hildesheimer’s work may be found in a 1981 *New York Times* review of a production of *Mary Stuart* at the prestigious Public Theatre, in which he is referred to as “an obscure postwar absurdist playwright.” (Frank Rich, “An Absurdist ‘Mary Stuart,’” *NYT* of February 17, 1981. Web).

⁹⁵ John Simon. “A Passion for Art and Mother,” *The New York Times*, October 9, 1983. Web. July 2015.

⁹⁶ Hildesheimer’s full response to the *LRB* is included in Stern (1982).

publication, including her own⁹⁷. It is possible to identify various streams of commentary. Critics such as Abramson and Littlejohn are interested mainly in the themes of mystification and deception. Abramson places the novel in a long line of literary mystifications and considers its theme to be the process of culture production (Abramson 2005, chapter 4). Weisstein represents those who take a comparative approach looking, amongst other things, at the influences of art and music criticism found in the novel. A large group of scholar-critics, mainly but not entirely German, analyze *Marbot* in the context of Hildesheimer's complete work and have produced any number of interpretations of the novel. Stanley and the contributors to the *Text & Kritik* issue are representative of this group. The various lines of interpretation include questions of comparison and continuity between *Mozart* and *Marbot*, notions of parody and satire in Hildesheimer's writings as far back as *Lieblose Legenden*, the influence of his *Endzeit* ideas as expressed in "The End of Fiction" and his literature of the absurd. There is relatively less work analyzing *Marbot* as an historical novel or a work of postmodernism. Finally, there is narratological analysis which sees the novel as constituting a break with the conventions of fictional biography.

4.2 The blurring of generic conventions in *Marbot*

4.2.1 Forms of biographical discourse: *Marbot* as psychobiography

I have analysed both *Schrecken* and *Vermessung* according to Ansgar Nünning's classification schema of historical novels. *Marbot*, however, presents difficulties in this regard. As Nünning himself noted, "A number of postmodernist historical novels, however, resist generic classification altogether, or at least test the limits of it, because they are characterized by a blurring of genre conventions ... (resulting) in the emergence of new hybrid forms like fictional biography, new manifestations of the Gothic novel ... and postmodern variants of historical fiction" (Nünning 1997, 232).

It is precisely this blurring of conventions that has attracted the interest of narratologists. Both Dorrit Cohn and Käte Hamburger have written articles that seek to clarify the novel's

⁹⁷ She also provides a useful bibliography of works by and about Hildesheimer organized chronologically.

generic classification. *Marbot* presents itself as authentic historical biography, claiming the mantle of textual authority. Käte Hamburger calls this *Konstruktion* a “theoretical paradox” in that it depicts a fictional character as a real person within a real historical setting (Hamburger 1992, 96). It is all the more paradoxical that Hildesheimer intended that readers should perceive the novel’s fictionality. In other words, he structured it to create and then undermine its own textual authority. From a narratological point of view, *Marbot* is seen as an interesting literary experiment and a work which, by its very structure, creates unintended consequences relating to the manner in which it is read even by the experienced reader for whom it was destined. Of particular interest is how the novel creates an implied, fictional narrator and generates parodic readings, the latter being important for the novel’s characterization as postmodern.

A simplified schema of biography sees historical or fictional discourse used to portray both historical and fictional lives.⁹⁸ Historical biography is, in principle, a subset of historiography. It uses historical discourse to depict the lives of people who have really lived. Although biography is a minor, simplified genre within the broader field of historiography, historical biographers are still held to the same rules of evidence-based narrative that the profession applies to history writing in general.⁹⁹ Fictional biography, on the other hand, is a subset of fictional discourse which may be used to depict the lives of historical or fictional figures. Cohn refers to the former as “fictionalized historical biography” and to the latter as “fictional biography” as such. She lists *Lenz* and *Tod in Venedig*, respectively, as examples of these genres.¹⁰⁰

Although applying the rules of evidence-based narrative may be the ultimate goal of historical biography, in practice there are considerable variations in the techniques used. Many authors eschew the conventional, realist form of biography and seek to portray the inner lives of their subjects, as did Hildesheimer in *Mozart*. However, the factual biographer cannot claim omniscience in respect of the mind of his subject. He must, therefore, proceed by inference

⁹⁸ The schema is Dorrit Cohn’s presented in Cohn (1999c), 85.

⁹⁹ For example, the conventions of historiography would require that the biographer establish the authenticity of data, weigh the relevance of previous scholarship and exhibit both common sense and narrative flair (Schabert 1982, 9-10).

¹⁰⁰ Cohn 1999a presents a more complete treatment of the subject.

and assumptions. Unable to use techniques such as quoted monologue, these biographers generally adopt some form of “psycho-narration” to portray the psychology of their characters, weaving, where available, autobiographical material into their narratives as quotation or paraphrase to bring the reader as close as possible to the protagonist’s inner life.¹⁰¹ There is considerable variation in this approach to narration but, in all cases, the principles of historiographic coherence oblige factual biographers to maintain a clear distance between the narrating voice and the consciousness of the figure whose life is being depicted. To lose this distance would bring the work dangerously close to the domain of fiction.

The resultant narrative is usually referred to as psychobiography, an approach which uses psychology as an analytical tool (Schabert 1990, 54-56). This approach takes selective biographical facts as “creative nuclei” on the basis of which the author infers the conscious and subconscious mental life of the subject, who is then depicted “according to patterns of the post-realist and post-Freudian novel.”¹⁰² Biographies of this type are necessarily speculative and contain a large measure of imaginative interpretation, often blurring the borderline separating biography and fiction (Schabert 1982, 3). Some authors will, therefore, try to clarify for the reader the limits of the creative imagination in their work.¹⁰³ *Marbot*, like *Mozart* before it, takes the form of psychobiography and Marbot’s biographer makes perfectly clear the approach used in portraying the life of his protagonist: “Es ist nicht die Absicht dieser Biographie, Marbots negative Antwort an die Welt moralisch zu werten, sondern vielmehr die Motive zu ergründen, denen sie entsprang, und die psychische Konstellation, die sie möglich, oder wenn man so will, notwendig machte” (*Marbot*, 19).¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Psycho-narration is a word coined by Cohn and refers to the process of narrating the consciousness of characters (see Cohn 1978, 21-57).

¹⁰² Schabert 1982, 12. Schabert uses the term “psychohistory.”

¹⁰³ In the introduction to *Mozart*, for example, Hildesheimer states, “Gewiß, er (the reader) wird sich mit einer Gestalt der Vorstellungskraft bescheiden müssen, doch keineswegs mit einer Gestalt des Einbildungskraft.” Wolfgang Hildesheimer (1982). *Mozart*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 9. Print.

¹⁰⁴ Hildesheimer described his approach to *Marbot* as follows: “(Ich bin) als Verfasser eines Buches über (Marbot), ein sozusagen didaktisches Ich, das seine Biographie so schreibt, wie meiner Ansicht nach jede Biographie geschrieben werden müßte, nämlich im richtigen Maße zwischen belegbaren Fakten und Spekulation, zwischen Vermutung and Wissen, zwischen Überzeugung und Zweifel, und immer das eine von anderen streng und genau getrennt.” (Hildesheimer 1982a, 262)

4.2.2 *Marbot* as “historicized fictional biography”¹⁰⁵

Hildesheimer understood what a biography should look like and this is reflected in *Marbot*. All the usual evidential material is present, ranging from an index of names to portraits of Marbot, his mother, Lady Catherine, and others. Letters and documents are falsified and images mislabeled, but this only adds to the reality effect of the construction. The novel is populated with real historical figures with whom Marbot interrelates. Multiple viewpoints are created as many of these figures comment upon Marbot just as he comments upon them. Goethe’s comments supposedly come from Eckermann. Marbot’s opinions about Goethe’s theory of art find their way into his letters. Schopenhauer’s description of meeting the young Englishman in the Boboli Gardens is followed directly by an excerpt from Marbot’s correspondence describing the “lively little German philosopher” (this phrase is rendered in English, *Marbot* 140). The narrator quotes from and criticizes a fictional biography of Marbot published by one Frederic Hadley-Chase in 1888. A paper trail is established to authenticate the documents in the biographer’s possession and he announces his intention to publish a definitive (if not entirely complete) version of Marbot’s notebooks and letters. Importantly, he weaves a multitude of excerpts from Marbot’s writing into the narrative providing a basis for the psychological analysis of his protagonist.

What stands out most strikingly is the manner in which the biographer adheres to historiographic norms in narrating and interpreting the life and psychology of his subject, in particular the norm of narrative nescience. The biographer avoids recording anything that could not have been found in or inferred from the data. He has no direct window into Marbot’s psyche and takes pains to relativize his analysis of him. This anomaly led Cohn to classify the novel on her two dimensional grid of historical and fictional biography as the only example known to her of a new category called “historicized fictional biography,” that is, a biography where non-fictional discourse is used to narrate the life of a fictional protagonist (Cohn 1999c, 85). This accounts for the peculiar tone of the novel which narrates extreme personal relationships but keeps the reader distanced from the main characters.

¹⁰⁵ The analysis in this section draws on the article “Breaking the Code of Fictional Biography” (Cohn 1999c).

Cohn expresses in a more elaborate manner Hamburger's formulation of the novel being a "theoretical paradox." Essentially, the conclusion is the same, that the novel establishes a new literary form. Presenting a fictional figure as real is a reversal of the conventions of historical fiction. To describe the work simply as a deception avoids the question as to why it was structured in such a manner. However approached, the novel remains problematic and eludes easy interpretation. (Hamburger 1992, particularly 92-95).

4.2.3 The implied narrator: reading parody and irony into *Marbot*

Linda Hutcheon defines postmodern parody as repetition with critical distance that uses irony to signal this difference within the parodic structure. As an imitation of biography, *Marbot* is by definition parodic. Its parody is expressed principally on the level of the biographical discourse although the *Marbot* narrative also imitates elements of *Bildungs-* and *Künstlerromane* and the idle young English protagonist appears as a pastiche of literary characters such as Oedipus and Werther.¹⁰⁶ The question remains as to what exactly is being parodied and here issues of reception, i.e. how the novel is decoded by the reader, as well as authorial intent, are important.

Hildesheimer has said that he did not intend to write a novel framed by a fictional narrator and expected to be identified with the voice of the biographer (Hildesheimer 1982a, 259).¹⁰⁷ Yet, to his dismay, there were readers who compared the narrator of *Marbot* with Serenus Zeitblom (ibid.). Historical writing is deemed to be the voice of the author but, because *Marbot* is a fictional narrative, the identity of the narrator becomes an issue both theoretically and on the level of reception. It is characteristic of fictional biography that its narrator be perceived as distinct from its author, what Cohn calls "a deep-seated feature of the generic code" (Cohn 1999c, 92). A reader who approaches *Marbot* as fiction will almost certainly interpret the biographical frame as emanating from a fictional narrator, particularly because the narrating voice is always present and speaks at great length about his own work and ideas. Thus, the personality of the biographer becomes an issue of interpretation and certain people

¹⁰⁶ In a moment of high wit, J.P. Stern comments upon the fact that, with *Marbot's* disappearance, his suicide was confirmed by the fact that one of his dueling pistols was missing: "Ironically, he thought Werther overrated" (Stern 1982, 9).

¹⁰⁷ "Ich wollte ja keinen Roman schreiben, in dem auch die Rahmenfigur eine Fiktion ist".

found the biographer to be “hochtrabend” and “pedantisch” (Hildesheimer 1982a, 259). Cohn, in fact, characterizes him as “a self-promoting fop, who ... overinflates the explanatory value of biographical data” (Cohn 1999c, 90).

Hildesheimer’s denial that he intended to write a parodic novel (Hildesheimer 1982a, 256) does not alter the fact that the work remains an imitation of biography. As such, *Marbot* invites a parodic reading although whether it parodies the author’s own voice in his earlier *Mozart* or the biographical genre is difficult to determine with certainty. Cohn sees *Marbot* as self-pastiche, using near verbatim repetition of didactic comments on the craft of biography from *Mozart* (Cohn 1999c, 86-88). These passages are highly critical of the penchant of conventional biographers for the hero-worship of their protagonists and the glossing over of unsavoury, scandalous and erotic aspects of their behaviour. These critiques of conventional biography are also expressed by Hildesheimer elsewhere, for example, in his 1981 presentation “Die Subjektivität des Biographen.” Consequently, it is my view that *Marbot* should be interpreted as a critical parody of the biographical genre.

Marbot is a cunning novel whose structure of mock biography and tone of pedantic scholarly discourse invite an ironic reading of the whole. Hamburger hears “the author’s quiet laugh” behind his presentation of the first stirrings of Marbot’s Oedipal feelings, the child’s contemplation of Tintoretto’s “The Origin of the Milky Way ” (Hamburger 1992, 94). The very first pages of the book depict a fabricated conversation where Goethe asks Marbot why he calls his family story a myth. Marbot expresses his mistrust of all such stories, as likely as they may appear to be: “Für mich ist nur das Wahre wahr, das Wahrscheinliche dagegen Schein” (*Marbot*, 7), a statement pointing ironically to his own fictionality. There is potent irony in the key incest scene, in the biographer’s controlled description of the event and then his succumbing to the temptation of language like “Lady Catherine haucht ein halb flehentliches, halb vergehendes »Nein«” only to return in the next paragraph to his pedantic self: “wer wen ins Schlafzimmer zieht, ist ungewiß” (*Marbot*, 74-75). This sardonic humour is also evident in the way in which Marbot’s reserved yet affable aristocratic personality and *pince-sans-rire* English humour is perceived by the puzzled Italians who meet him in Urbino. The dinner stories he recounts of his youth and family leave his interlocutors unable to tell whether he is being serious or maliciously ironic. “Oft habe er die Tischgesellschaft zum

lachen gebracht, wobei keiner genau wußte, ob er dies angestrebt habe, denn er selbst sei ernst geblieben” (*Marbot*, 234). This is a very good description of the novel as a whole.

4.3 Characteristics of postmodernism in *Marbot*

Marbot has been characterized as belonging to a group of postmodern novels published in the 1980’s, including Ransmayr’s *Schrecken*, among whose features is a playful handling of the conventions of the historical novel. Fictional biography was among the mixed forms of historical fiction to emerge at that time and *Marbot*, with its deceptively real depiction of the life of an early 19th century intellectual, is seen as the most striking example of the genre (Costagli 2012, 264-266). “Playful” (*spielerisch*) is not an unreasonable description for this work made to look like a hoax, yet whose author alerted elements of his public to its fictionality even before publication. Hildesheimer also began to quote his protagonist as a real person before august audiences and seems to have derived great pleasure from getting away with it.¹⁰⁸ Thus, the misleading paratext *Eine Biographie* may be seen more as *Spiel* than deception. Playful, parodic and ironic are among the chief characteristics of postmodern fiction.

It is also characteristic that the borders between literary genres have become fluid with fiction looking like biography, autobiography or history (Hutcheon 1988, 9). From the narratological analysis above, it is clear that *Marbot* breaks the generic codes of fictional biography, creating a category onto itself. Other borders are also crossed in the novel, putting the distinction between the real and the fictional into question. *Marbot* does not operate only within the dark areas of history. A trail of anecdotes weaves his life intimately with those of famous contemporaries. He inserts himself into the aesthetic controversies of his time, even publishing an article defending Turner. This fragmentary representation of the Romantic period as experienced by an idiosyncratic English aristocrat, what Hildesheimer calls the “synchron-optische Darstellung des geistigen Westeuropa zwischen 1800-1830” (Hildesheimer 1982a, 257), brings these figures into his fictional space. “When such

¹⁰⁸ “So habe ich ihn seit der Entstehungszeit so oft wie möglich zitiert, um ihn einzuführen: zweimal in meiner Rede zur Eröffnung der Salzburger Festspiele 1980, dazu mehrmals bei anderen Eröffnungen oder in Katalogentexten, immer mit besten Gewissen und immer ungestraft, ja, unangefochten.” (Hildesheimer 1982a, 255)

migrations occur, an ontological boundary between the real and the fictional ... has been transgressed” (McHale 1987, 90). In *Marbot*, the deceptions involved in this transgression are laid bare (i.e. rendered parodic) since we have no difficulty in demonstrating, for example, that Goethe never met an Englishman named Marbot or that Schopenhauer never mentioned meeting such a person in a letter to his friend Osann, as the novel claims (*Marbot*, 140). The novel must breach the border between fiction and history to sustain its biographical form, demonstrating the porous boundaries of the real as they apply to historical reconstruction.¹⁰⁹

Also characteristic of postmodernism is the manner in which intertexts from literature are inserted into the novel’s biographical discourse and used as an explanatory device, further blurring the boundaries between history and fiction. Marbot’s diaries and letters present numerous references to and quotations from texts such as *Oedipus Rex*, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, which speak to the themes of incest, suicide and the futility of life. Shakespeare plays a special role. The biographer, quoting from Marbot’s notebooks, references Macbeth’s speech beginning “Life’s but a walking shadow (*Marbot*, 50-52), Gertrude’s “incestuous sheets” (ibid., 173-174) and Hamlet’s reflections on “The undiscovered country from whose bourne / No traveller returns” (ibid., 199). Just as, according to Hayden White, fictional archetypes are applied to historical events to create understandable narratives, Marbot’s biographer turns to models of a literary nature to represent his protagonist as a hero and his life as drama.¹¹⁰ The narratives of historical Romanticism and classical tragedy are both present in the novel. In this manner, *Marbot* retells stories from history and literature, achieving the “parodically doubled discourse of postmodernist intertextuality” (Hutcheon 1988, 128).

The role of literary models can be seen in the incestuous relationship between Marbot and his mother and the subsequent death of Lady Catherine, all of which can be rephrased in a form akin to popular romance. The biographer presents typical novelistic images: hopeless passion, secret assignations, the menace of social ostracization, the collusion of trusted servants and the inevitable tragic end. And this end is also depicted as romantic drama, “so könnten wir sagen, Lady Catherine starb am gebrochenen Herzen” (*Marbot*, 162-163). The

¹⁰⁹ Neumann, finds “den geschichtsphilosophischen Ernst dieses Spieles (in der) Verschleierung des Grenzverlaufs zwischen Historie und Fiktion” (Neumann 1986, 28).

¹¹⁰ Long (1998), pp. 41-44, summarizes how the “symbolic and evocative properties of literary models ... are fully exploited” in *Marbot*.

biographer asserts repeatedly that Marbot's life should be seen as tragedy. This is not simply because of the relationship with his mother but also because he realizes that as he will never be able to create art, his life is to remain repetitious and senseless. "Marbot war müde geworden." (*Marbot*, 311) The biographer pursues the literary motif of tragedy to the end, interpreting Marbot's last, obscure notebook entry - "and I shall go to bed at noon" (*Marbot*, 312) - as a reference to his impending suicide and to *King Lear*.

Then the protagonist literally rides off - leaving behind one of a pair of dueling pistols - and disappears, an ironic ending symbolic of the immaterial nature of the subject. *Marbot* cannot be read as tragedy. By its very structure and deceptions, the novel lends itself to an ironic reading and the web of literary allusions acts as a source of narrative dissonance within its biographical discourse. Transforming Marbot's life into tragedy is a task that eludes the pedantic narrator, while the literary allusions and tragic model simply underscore the generic ambiguities of the work.

4.4 *Marbot* as historical fiction: an idiosyncratic image of Romanticism

Marbot is a complex example of historical fiction, hiding its fictionality behind a veneer of historical biography. That veneer is easily enough peeled away but its biographical form continues to dominate the novel, creating an overpowering narrative voice and limiting the reader's capacity fully to enter into the consciousness of the protagonist. *Marbot* is highly idiosyncratic. Hildesheimer has identified two dominant themes: first, the appreciation (*Rezeption*) of art, in particular Romantic art, at the beginning of the 19th century and therewith the beginning of art aesthetics as a discipline and, second, incest as pathological behaviour (Hildesheimer 1982a, 256-257). This latter theme is the centre of the novel's psychobiographical treatment. Here, however, I am interested principally in the work's historical context. The historical focus in *Marbot* is not on an event or sequence of events, but rather on a cultural era. Hildesheimer created Marbot as a witness to his period (*ibid.*, 255). The protagonist reflects for the reader the artistic and intellectual society of Romantic Europe as he wanders through it, commenting from his particular point of view upon people, art and places until he settles in the Italian backwater of Urbino. "Ich wollte nichts Geringes, als den Teilaspekt einer kulturgeschichtlichen Epoche schildern, in der sich die von mir beigesteuerte

und damit selbst besteuernde Gestalt *ad libitum* kommentierend und beleuchtend und erleuchtend bewegt” (ibid., 259). Marbot’s point of view is that of a young English aristocrat and outsider, an example of the ex-centric vision of postmodernism. His views on art may or may not in themselves be interesting or visionary as the biographer maintains. They are, in any case, part of the texture of the historical novel.

The portrayal of Marbot is part of this Romantic complex. Earnest, yet giving the impression of not quite taking himself seriously, he bears himself with ironic reserve (*Marbot*, 17-18). He is presented not as an assiduous cultural traveller but as a melancholy idler roaming from painting to painting seemingly animated by nothing more than a “romantisches Ennui.” Besides art, his programme is the search objectively to justify his eventual suicide. Marbot is created to complete and contrast with the period, “objektiv ein Romantiker, subjektiv ein Antiromantiker.”¹¹¹ In this, he does nothing more than reflect the contradictions of the Romantic period. His most significant Romantic traits are probably his emphasis on authenticity and spontaneity as the basis of a personal aesthetic, as well as his strong individuality exemplified in the rejection of ethical and religious norms including the Catholic notion of sin.¹¹²

Unlike the other two novels of my corpus, *Marbot* defies generic classification according to Nünning’s schema. Everything the biographer does to revise the history of Marbot’s life, to come to terms with new evidence, rework documentary material and reconstruct past events is simply his normal scholarly activity. He does not question the nature of historical knowledge nor raise philosophical issues about the manner in which the past comes to him as discourse and text. Where *Schrecken* and *Vermessung* foreground issues of this kind, Marbot’s biographer focuses upon his personal role in Marbot scholarship. In this work, the problematic nature of historical knowledge emerges through the contradiction between the novel’s historical discourse and its fictional subject, a contradiction which blurs and tests the limits of generic conventions.

¹¹¹ Hildesheimer 1982b, 155-156, where the author describes the personality of his protagonist in a speech before the Schopenhauer Society.

¹¹² “The only constant and common factor in (the Romantics’) ever-shifting attitudes and scales of value was belief in the importance of individuality - of the individual self and its capacity for experience - and the rejection of values not expressive of it.” Hugh Honour (1984). *Romanticism*. Frome and London: Pelican, 23. Print.

4.5 A reading of *Marbot*

My goal in this section is to suggest the central themes of *Marbot* which I believe to reside in Hildesheimer's skepticism about historical writing and his long-standing belief in the absurd. I make reference here to his *Anmerkungen* to the historical drama *Mary Stuart*, one of his works of absurdist theatre. In this play, the author postulates the absurdity of the historical method.¹¹³ Ultimately, the notion of cause and effect which underpins historical writing leads only to establishing a chain of events but not to an understanding of the inner motivations which made historical figures act as they did: "es ist uns versagt, in die Seelen aller beteiligten an einem »historischen Geschehen« erkennend einzudringen" (Hildesheimer 1970, 845). This is particularly true of the period before the French Revolution when "schon herrscht dichter Nebel in der Seelenlandschaft" of the historical protagonists (ibid.).

Thus, his protagonist in *Marbot* is made to live at a time when we begin to have some sense of how people thought. The incestuous roots of his psyche are spelled out and linked to his ideas on art. Yet, the biography is presented in an haphazard manner with references and episodes from the protagonist's life scattered unsystematically throughout the text as if in a puzzle. Only at the end of the novel can the reader reconstruct the information and create a complete chronological narrative (Abramson 2005, 131-132). Moreover, at the end, the biographer admits his failure fully to understand the life of the figure he has depicted "denn es fehlt uns ein Schlüssel zu seiner humanen Seite, zu Anspruch und Bedarf an mitmenschlicher Beziehung" (*Marbot*, 318).

The historical method thus appears unequal to the task of representing the story of Marbot. The key to his inner life would be more fully grasped through fictional means, namely, through the omniscience denied the biographer. Indeed, the novel makes liberal use of literary motifs as an explanatory strategy, as we have seen. The last years of Marbot's life suggest "pathos" to the narrator and he characterizes his hero in Urbino as a "tragischer Flüchtige" (*Marbot*, 279 and 318 respectively). However, the historical/biographical form contradicts his efforts to apply figurative explanations to Marbot's story. The trope of biography hinders the

¹¹³ The *Anmerkungen* begin: "Indem dieses Stück sowohl »historisch« als auch »absurd« ist, vertritt es die Behauptung, daß Geschichte absurd sei." (Hildesheimer 1970, 844)

attempt to clothe his life in the garb of tragedy as the persistent irony of *Marbot* overwhelms such attempts at drama.¹¹⁴

Irony could, however, support an absurdist interpretation of the novel. Hildesheimer said that he identified with Marbot in a number of respects. He too would have liked to be an artist (indeed, he turned progressively to art in his later years) and, like his protagonist, had an interest in Schopenhauer and Leopardi, sharing their negative views of life (Hildesheimer 1982a, 262). Significantly, Hildesheimer, who had a lifelong association with the literature of the absurd (Loquai 1986, 58), also shared with his character the feeling of being a failure.¹¹⁵

Failure as a persistent feature of human experience is an element of the absurd. Marbot's recognition of his incapacity ever to become an artist and his realization that life meant a senseless repetition of this failure are the elements to which the biographer attributes his suicide. Literary references taken from the notebooks are used to present this theme, for example, the quotation from Macbeth that life "is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing." The absurd also asserts itself in the manner in which the narrator uses Marbot's analysis of the Gonzaga frescoes to introduce and highlight the word *Schweigen*. Writing to van Rossum, Marbot describes the frescoes as showing a secretary walking over to the duke "um ihm etwas ins Ohr zu schweigen" and asks, in English, "Why do we not have a word for the verb »Schweigen?«" (*Marbot*, 224-225). I read this as a reference to the phrase from Camus's *Le mythe de Sisyphe* which, rendered in German, reads: "Das Absurde entsteht aus dieser Gegenüberstellung des Menschen, der fragt, und der Welt, die vernunftwidrig schweigt" (Loquai 1986, 58).

Le mythe de Sisyphe posits suicide as a response to the absurdity of life.¹¹⁶ Suicide, of course, is a key theme of the Marbot narrative: "Marbots Leben erhält seinen höchsten Sinn

¹¹⁴ In this I differ from Hildesheimer's critics such as Neumann who see *Marbot* as a perfect biography, exception made for the fact that its hero is fictional (Neumann 1981).

¹¹⁵ Hildesheimer 1982a. He stated in an interview published in 1971: "(...) das Eingeständnis des Scheiterns, das scheint mir ein wesentliche Element an mir, ich sehe mich in gewisser Weise als einen Gescheiterten," quoted in Loquai (1986), 58.

¹¹⁶ Camus's text begins, "Il n'y a qu'un problème philosophique vraiment sérieux : c'est le suicide. Juger que le vie vaut ou ne vaut pas la peine d'être vécue, c'est répondre à la question fondamentale de la philosophie." Albert Camus (1942). *Le mythe de Sisyphe, Essai sur l'absurde*. Paris: Gallimard. Web.

durch den Freitod” (*Marbot*, 20). The narrative uses Schopenhauer and Leopardi as his sounding boards on the subject. Both see life from a negative perspective but reject the principle of suicide, a contradiction Marbot cannot accept. Nor does he accept Schopenhauer’s term *Selbstmord*. Philosophically, he adopts the word *Freitod*, the act of taking “arms against a sea of troubles” as Hamlet expresses it.

To occupy oneself with art is a survival strategy in an absurd world (Hildesheimer-Kesting 1982, 89). But for Marbot, who lacked the ability to create art, the flight from life into art was denied him (*Marbot*, 318). His suicide can be understood as a logical decision, at once consequent on his view of life and a mastery of it, a transformation of failure as it were: “Im Gegensatz zu so vielen Stümpfern im Scheitern hat Marbot das seine gemeistert” (*Marbot*, 318). The Marbot narrative may in this manner be interpreted as an allegory of the absurd.

Conclusion

In this study of the forms of postmodern historical fiction, my goal has been to define, characterize and analyze three postmodern German language historical novels. *Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis* (1984) was Ransmayr's first novel and *Marbot* (1981), Hildesheimer's last. Both appealed to a relatively limited audience when they appeared although the success of Ransmayr's later *Die Letzte Welt* sparked a belated interest in his first novel as well. Kehlmann was already a popular novelist in 2005 when *Die Vermessung der Welt* was published and became a runaway best-seller. These works are different in tone and content and, indeed, were chosen as representing different forms of historical fiction. Nevertheless, there are significant formal similarities between them and my approach has been to apply consistent categories of analysis focusing on each work's reception, characteristics of postmodernism and categorization as historical novels.

Both *Vermessung* and *Schrecken* lend themselves readily to categorization according to the schema of historical novels proposed by Ansgar Nünning. The satiric atmosphere and Pop ethos of *Vermessung* are beguiling and make the novel's revisionist critique of the conservative lionization of Humboldt and the colonial nature of exploration accessible without being overbearing. *Schrecken* is a more complex work structurally and thematically. Its polyphonic narrative creates a compelling depiction of the struggle and suffering of the crew of the North-Pole expedition. It is an ironic metahistorical novel which foregrounds the problematic issues of historical reconstruction.

Marbot uses historical/biographical discourse to tell the life of a fictional hero and is the most idiosyncratic work of the three. Its distanced biographical form allows the reader little insight into Marbot's psyche and motivations other than that mediated by an unreliable narrator. Although it does not dovetail with Nünning's categorization scheme, *Marbot* is still an ingenious historical novel whose fictional protagonist plays the role of observer, moving amongst real historical figures taken from the intellectual and artistic history of European Romanticism. Moreover, narratologists have found the work of great interest, categorizing it as a new form of fictional biography.

Despite their differences, these works share the principal features of postmodern historical novels. They display the primacy of fiction within the history-fiction continuum. All three willfully cross generic boundaries. *Vermessung* uses the genre of fictionalized historical biography as satire to debunk the reputation of the icons of German classicism. *Marbot* casts the biography of its fictional hero in the guise of historical discourse. In the Mazzini narrative in *Schrecken*, fictional biography masquerades as historical reconstruction. Featuring the presence of historical figures as main or supporting characters, these works present the real and the imaginary as if they were of the same ontological order, thereby illustrating postmodernism's probing of the problematic relationship between fiction and history.

The novels demonstrate, moreover, the distancing of postmodernist historical fiction away from the high-art character of modernism. Exploration and science, for example are themes normally associated with popular literary genres like adventure stories. Biography is another popular genre. Also typically postmodern is the manner in which the novels foreground the ex-centric, using outsiders like Mazzini and Marbot at the centre of the narratives, as well as setting the action in far-flung locales away from the metropolises of Western culture. The centre, on the other hand, is treated with satire (the Weimar clique) or scorn (Viennese society in *Schrecken*). The ex-centric is thus reflected in the core theme of travel around which all three stories are structured. This motif invariably depicts alien cultures and often extreme environments at the heart of the spatial dimension of the narratives.

The travel motif takes various forms: exploration beyond the borders of the so-called civilized world, adventure, adventure-tourism, field work, the ritualized grand tour of Europe, heroic processions and exile. Whatever the specifics, the stories evolve as interactions between the protagonists and the environments they enter and their voyages also carry figurative meaning. The Arctic and the Orinoco are at once hostile and mythical environments. Mazzini travels largely in his own imagination searching for a time and place that no longer exist. He represents the search for the reconstruction of a non-existent past and is ejected from the narrative as soon as it is made clear that the north is a real rather than an imaginary space. Weyprecht and Payer travel north with the authority of Imperial Austria in a hopeless and ultimately absurd quest that ends, ironically, with their heroic procession home. The reconstruction of the story of this expedition metonymically recreates the contradictions, stasis

and ultimate collapse of the empire. Humboldt's voyage of exploration to South America, "der Botschaft Weimars in Macondo," is the main source of the novel's satirical critique of a rationalist elite, past and present. Gauß's flights of imagination to a universe of curved space invisible to the rational mind is the narrative counterpart to the outmoded tenets of classicism. Marbot is both a tourist, in the tradition of the grand tour, and a *Flüchtling* and, like Mazzini, must physically disappear from the novel because he is not part of the "real" creative and cultural universe through which he travels.

All three books share the essential parodic structure and ironic mode that have come to characterize the postmodern historical novel. Postmodern parody serves a metafictional function; that is, it becomes the principal carrier of skeptical self-reflexivity. Thus, *Marbot* parodies the biographical genre, questioning the capacity of works of this kind to understand the lives they depict. The narrative of Humboldt travelling through South America is transformed into a pulp adventure story and its parodic core is central to the novel's revisionist spirit. Payer's report of the North Pole expedition is transmuted into a polyphonic account which questions the imperial narrative of exploration and heroism. Mazzini pursues a chimera in a story that imitates the failed expeditions of the past.

The "parodically doubled discourse of postmodernist intertextuality," as defined by Hutcheon, is central to these novels. Political narratives of conservatism, exploration and conquest are the parodied texts of *Vermessung*. The counterpoise to Weimar classicism is the sub-text of Magic Realism represented spatially by the Orinoco and on the level of discourse by Humboldt's story-telling oarsmen. *Schrecken* makes abundant use of myth to ironize the modern myth of heroism. *Marbot*, as it parodies the problematic discourse of biography, avails itself of the literary archetypes of tragedy and the absurd to give sense to the protagonist's story.

Although the postmodern historical novel emerged in the German cultural space later than in America or the U.K., these German language novels deploy the prominent stylistic devices of postmodern fiction. Their specificity lies, naturally enough, in their thematic content, namely, the manner in which they criticize and ironize German and Austrian history and culture. The deconstruction of Weimar classicism is a particularly German theme just as the

collapse of the dual monarchy is specifically Austrian. A Eurocentric spirit applies to *Marbot*, where the culture of European Romanticism constitutes the historical field of the novel.

Finally, the creation and use of texts are thematic in all three works. The characters participate in this textual universe as they write obsessively of their travels. Their adventures are transformative and they keep notebooks and diaries just as the real historical figures on whom they are based did. It is emblematic in this respect that Humboldt, as he travels, creates his own public persona through the reports and articles he composes and sends home. Gauß takes a copy of his *Disquisitiones* to the aged, and now demented, Kant. Early in the narrative, Marbot buys a series of leather-bound, quarto notebooks which he carries around with him and fills with all manner of theoretical and personal musings and it is these diaries which contain his principal writings on art. He leaves the notebooks and a voluminous correspondence behind him, the secrets of which have now, we are told, been unlocked by his biographer. Mazzini wrote extreme adventure fiction before he tried to live one and his travel notebooks are now source material in the hands of the narrator. Payer publishes a lengthy report on the expedition shortly after his return, replete with etchings of the Arctic landscape, and Mazzini's discovery of this very book is the trigger event in *Schrecken*.

The novels thus foreground the act of writing on the level of discourse. Marbot's biographer writes the life of his English hero, he tells us, as a prelude to an upcoming edition of his notebooks and letters. The use of indirect discourse in *Vermessung* is a statement that historical fiction need not be trivial. The narrator of *Schrecken* simultaneously creates and inhabits his narrative space; and when we see him in his studio at the end, surrounded by the maps and files that encompass the events of the novel, this symbolizes the role of the literary imagination in the reconstruction of history. Thus, writing and literature are recurrent themes as the protagonists try to make sense of what they have been through and the narrators reconstruct their adventures and question the nature of their stories, manipulating historical data and mining literary history for this purpose. All this gives credence to Eco's comment in the postscript to *Il nome della rosa* that all books are ultimately about other books.

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