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**INFORMATIONAL PRACTICES IN GERMAN POETRY:
ERNST MEISTER, OSWALD EGGER, FRIEDRICH GOTTLIEB KLOPSTOCK**

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation addresses the ways in which the emergence of technological media and information theory has altered the place of poetry in the realm of human communication. Against claims that would see poetry as fundamentally opposed to information, I propose a reading of poetry as information and a counter-theory of information as a poetic practice. In three successive chapters, each on a distinct practice of the “information triangle” (storage, transmission, organization) and its poetic analogies (memory, communication, grammar), I develop such a practice through three figures that bridge the gap between the seemingly informational on the one side and the poetic on the other: *Haltsamkeit*, *Mitteilung*, and *Mitausdruck*. My major examples are from German-language poetry (Meister, Egger, Klopstock), with minor examples from English and Greek.

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Introduction

“Only a fool reads poetry for facts.”

–Daniel Tiffany, *Toy Medium*

“Do not forget that a poem, although it is
composed in the language of information,
is not used in the language-game of giving information.”

–Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*

An Opposition

For readers of poetry, there is profound truth to these aphoristic admonitions: a poem, we are inclined to agree, mandates a different attention from the fact-seeking requirements of a dictionary, a newspaper article, or a recipe. Poems are not *for facts*; nor are they *for giving information*, even when they appear to be (do not be that fool!) or when they are composed in the same information-giving language we would find in a text full of facts. Indeed, if we believe Wittgenstein, a poem demands special attention from its reader not because it denies the language of information, but because it persistently differentiates itself from it. Persistence, that is, in not being reducible to fact or information, in presenting itself, rather, as irreducible to its smaller units, the singularity of a piece of information, or the integrity of a fact.

Poetry’s claim on such irreducibility has perhaps never seemed less true or less urgent than in an era named for its orientation towards the reduction, simplification, and efficiency of communication: the age of information. One seismographic indicator of the age of information and

poetry's place in it, Wittgenstein's axiom provides a guiding line along which the distinctively different tasks of poetry and information (and its related activities) unfold. In recent scholarship on modern poetics it serves as marker of poetry's antagonistic relationship to information's different "language-game." Jahan Ramazani, for example, writes "if we take our cues from Wittgenstein and Benjamin [...], one approach to the impossibly general question we began with, 'what is poetry?,' is an almost equally general answer: under modernity, poetry is what is by virtue of not being the news."¹ Marjorie Perloff, advancing a Wittgensteinian poetics, emphasizes poetry's engagement with information as a modern aesthetic practice that emerges with poetry's "literal and spare" display of an "obsession with the uses of ordinary language."² Poetry does not exclude information from poetic discourse, she argues; rather poetry's alliance with its opposite produces a certain kind of poetics within the boundaries of the general Wittgensteinian binary.³ Similarly, Veronika Forrest-Thompson refers to Wittgenstein's aphorism at the beginning of *Theory of Twentieth-Century Poetry*, using it to point us to the work of the poem: "Every reader of poetry knows that statements are changed by their insertion in a poem, that they no longer mean what they would mean in ordinary speech."⁴ A line about eating the last plums in the refrigerator, for example, has very different effects depending on whether we read it on a note attached to that appliance or in a poem. To understand how a poem works, Forrest-Thompson says, we have to understand the poem's organization of thought and imagination as a poetic task "free from the fixed forms ordinary language imposes on

¹ Ramazani, *Poetry and Its Others*, 66.

² Perloff, *Wittgenstein's Ladder*, 117, 185.

³ The difference has been expressed in a number of different ways: as the result of a distinction between the "poetic" and "referential" (Jakobson, "Closing Statement," 357.) between the "emotive" and "referential" functions of language (Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*), between "moral" and "empirical" (on one hand) or "factual" statements (on the other) (Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem*, 27.). Each of these contrasts recognizes that our uses of language, our verbal modes of organizing, directing, and communicating words, are what separates poetry from facts. The distinction between these opposites can also be expressed in the language of older, more general distinctions between two antithetical epistemological cultures as a contrast between "mood" and "proof" (C. P. Snow), "entertaining" and "didactic" purposes (Aristotle, Horace, Brecht), "aesthetic" and "practical" judgments (Kant), or "intuitive" or "logical" knowledge (Croce)—or, for that matter, in the language of the many debates around and attempted dissolutions of these distinctions.

⁴ Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, x.

our minds,” as a task that affirms that a poem’s and information’s language-games are not the same.⁵ Yes: to recognize “the difference of literary from informational discourse”⁶ means to know that reading a poem and reading the news, a recipe, or a telephone book require certain kinds of attention and even knowledge. Only a fool reads poems for facts.⁷ To read a poem unfoolishly, then, is to hear this plea and not turn to the poem for factual knowledge; to remember that “facts in poetry are primarily factitious”⁸; and to value poetry’s “subtle interplay of sight and sound” over the news’ “immediate cognitive gratification.”⁹ Whatever exactly language’s “poetic” and “informational” capacities are, they can be provisionally defined as an opposition that establishes poetry’s purpose (not to provide facts), outlines its particularity as a genre (to take part in its own language-game), or adumbrates its specific demands on the reader (to recognize subtlety).

To be sure, poetry has long been the site where questions of language and the social are intensified and negotiated—including questions about the difference between everyday language and poetic expression, between form and content, representation and truth, saying and being. The idea that poetry is a special kind of language, opposed in some way to ordinary language, is not new. But that longstanding opposition takes a particular form in the twentieth century, when the concept of “information” sees a dramatic rise in critical and cultural prestige, a rise fueled, of course, by the rise of electrical and computational media and information technologies, including digital computers.

A History of Information

This digital age, the age of propelling, modernizing, and transforming communication and knowledge processes, organizes itself around an inconspicuous term that at once means nothing in

⁵ Ibid., 16.

⁶ Ramazani, *Poetry and Its Others*, 66.

⁷ Tiffany’s work on scientific metaphors in lyric poetry and Ramazani’s work on poetry’s dialogic engagement with the very genres it differentiates itself from (contra Jakobson) both offer ways to undermined this distinction rather than leaving it uncontested.

⁸ Bernstein, *Poetics*, 9.

⁹ Wachtel, *The Cambridge Introduction to Russian Poetry*, 2.

particular and potentially everything: information. The so-called age of information, that is, gets its name from a term so versatile that no one exactly knows what it is, how it behaves, or what it describes. Driven by the technological and computational possibilities to reorganize the epistemological order of this new era, many quickly recognized (or in some cases perhaps intuited) that in information's inconspicuous versatility lies a great power, and with such power the promise to revolutionize the fields of human interaction and communication for ages to come. Among them, Claude Shannon, Warren Weaver, and Norbert Wiener, who, at the historical “knot” of these developments in the early twentieth century, formulated a mathematical theory of communication, a theory of information that would dominate any effort to define what information is for the rest of the century and until today.

By 1948, their research originally done in the context of renewed wartime attention to signal processing and coding mechanisms led to the development and public dissemination of a field of study known as “information theory.” More than any other single development, this new discourse, largely focused on telecommunications and engineering problems, is responsible for introducing “information” as a measurable unit that can be stored, transmitted, and organized. Nothing and everything: as a “measurement,” information merely means anything by itself other than expressing the quantities of the processes it aims to capture in mathematical terms. But with this new definition of information, the men of 1948 made “information” the centerpiece of their conceptual models, developing the formulae of communication processes that contributed to advances in many areas, from the invention of modern computers to the conceptualization of the genetic code to the understanding of black holes.¹⁰ Transforming the concept of information in a broader scientific context, the inauguration of “information theory” belonged to a more general switch—whether actual or conceptual—from the analog to the digital that has dominated modern culture since the

¹⁰ See Shannon and Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*; Wiener, *Cybernetics or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*.

Second World War. Some sixty years later, “everything” can be explained, analyzed, and managed in terms of information—the universe, economy, sports, dating.¹¹ This understanding and organization of human life and the world around it as series of communicatory processes marks the more general economic and cultural shift from a post-industrial to information society, as Yoneji Masuda first proposed in his 1976 book of that title.¹²

Aesthetic theories have not been unaffected by these transformations in the fabric of culture.¹³ A main actor defining communication, the information-concept is full of exegetic promise for poetics and literary theories: if a poem or a literary text can be understood as an informational structure within a system (of, for example, social actions), its material relations can be analyzed and interpreted as or like any other natural system.¹⁴ The new tools that define information as a quantifiable and controlled material unit within a specific structure offer readers of cultural phenomena and literary texts the possibility of breaking from the hermeneutic tradition, the study of ideas, or the practice of close reading, a break that finds its contemporary apotheosis in the large-scale analytical approaches of the digital humanities.¹⁵ With the possibility to break down processes of communication into all its smaller parts, to make visible the tiniest bits of “information” a text produces systematically and structurally, comes the promise of understanding literature more precisely, more accurately, and more entirely than ever before. One can imagine that processes of communication govern, at least potentially, the creation and reception of any work of art, or rather:

¹¹ See, for example, Seife, *Decoding the Universe*; Lloyd, *Programming the Universe*.

¹² Masuda, *The Information Society as Post-Industrial Society*.

¹³ See Geoghegan, “From Information Theory to French Theory.”

¹⁴ As early as the late 1950s, humanist revisions of information theory have combined various engineering terms—entropy, uncertainty, channel, message, bit—with aesthetic principles to redefine “the work of art as a *message* and *carrier* of a particular type, namely *aesthetic information*” (Bense, *Programmierung des Schönen*, 22.). “This new esthetics ought to point out,” Abraham Moles wrote in 1958, “that every communication process has a common element, a *metrical* one: information per se” (Moles, *Information Theory and Esthetic Perception*. Translated by Joel E. Cohen., 193.). See also Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text*; Schmidt, *Grundriss der empirischen Literaturwissenschaft*.

¹⁵ See also Hayles, *How We Think*; Jockers, *Macroanalysis Digital Methods and Literary History*; Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees*; Moretti, *Distant Reading*.

one can imagine how informational terms like sender, receiver, code, and message would elucidate the processes governing our engagement with art and indeed comment on the nature of art itself.

But in turn, such promise also presents a threat to the unique position art occupies in the realm of human experience, and any opposition between poetry and information emerges within this larger cultural context. What options does such an opposition leave us? Either to view all communication as forms of information-processes, thereby understanding, for example, a poem and a bus schedule as equally information-bound, or, as we have seen in poetic theories that echo Wittgenstein, to relegate information to the side of the ordinary and factual, preserving a sacred space for the poetic. Either poetry, like the telegraph, the news, or birds on a wire, is an information system and can be understood and interpreted in information-theoretical terms (Bense, Schmidt, Lotman), or else poetry is, *sui generis*, either opposed to (giving) information or evoking informational practices when it deliberately distances itself from them (Wittgenstein, Benjamin, Perloff, Ramazani, Stephens, and so on).¹⁶ Both offer plausible visions within the current framework of information theory and poetics. But neither seems completely true (or completely false for that matter).

I turn, therefore, to poetry as a site of informational practices, a site devoting much of its generic, formal, and verbal efforts to the tensions that separate (or seem to separate) the “poetic” from the “factual” or “informational.” Each of the three chapters in this dissertation delineates a specific structure of practice, showing how understanding information in terms of its various practical configurations untangles some of the consequences and misconceptions of the recent history of information.

¹⁶ This is true even when, as one sees in Ramazani, the attempt is to argue that poetry *does* deal with the news after all, or, as in Perloff, when we experience surprise and astonishment at poetry that treats information or acts like it; in both cases the fundamental binary opposition between poetry and information grounds surprise or revelation, acting as the keelson of criticism. In the larger project of which this essay is a part, I argue that a fundamentally different theory of information would not produce this kind of startlement, putting poetry (and other forms of allegedly non-informational culture) back into a definition of information from the beginning.

Before getting to the chapters, however, we need to do two things: (1) look at the history of the word/concept “information” as it appears, first in Latin, then in English as well as, we will see later, in German, both before and after the rise of our contemporary information society; and (2) develop a theory of historical information practice that moves beyond, or rises above, the patterns imposed by a strictly nominalist history of information—moving, that is, from a history of “information” as a word to a history of information as a collection of linked social practices.

An Inversion, or many inversions, of “information”

So far, I have talked about the history of information since its birth as a quantity in the early twentieth century. A legacy of information’s recent history as term describing a factual and actual “bit” of a larger process, our contemporary information-concept owes much if not all of its force to the perpetuation of information as a “naturalized” entity. Following these mathematical and engineering definitions, information now means a specific piece of fact about something. Information is that which is organized, stored, and transmitted, such that when it is given to us we gain knowledge about a situation, circumstance, reality, or, we are told, really anything. What separates information from knowledge in these models is the relative independence of information from context, medium, or even language. Information presents facts, which is to say, information unlike knowledge is not *per se* expandable or variable and not, on the surface, embedded in social practices. Having information about a person, for example, would not be the same as knowing them. To know someone, we like to believe, requires something more than gathering basic (or even vast amounts of) information about that someone—age, nationality, gender, or food allergies may tell us more about a person, but we would still feel insulted if someone claimed to know us based on

that information. While knowledge in this model depends on all sorts of contextual and individual factors, information ought to remain the same no matter who, how, or why it is passed on.¹⁷

Thinking of “information” in this way is, however, a particularly modern way to think. “*Information* is,” John Durham Peters writes, “after all, a word with a history: it is a cultural invention that has come to prominence at a certain point in time, in a specific constellation of interests.”¹⁸ Our modern information concept presents itself as doubly alluring, once when it seemingly determines information to be ontologically separable from social activity, and again when it lets us forget that the concept of information itself has a history, as Peters writes, “full of inversions and compromises.”¹⁹

Peters’ work, tracing the historiographic and etymological shifts from information’s earlier meanings to its contemporary manifestations, shows a stunning recalibration of information as a historical concept:

From the Latin *informare* (to instruct) and *information* (idea, instruction, concept, doctrine), came a cluster of senses—*information* as *an item of new knowledge*—that more or less still prevails. But in the environment fashioned by Aristotle’s disciples in the late middle ages—preeminently Thomas Aquinas—*informatio* and *information* were used in a broader sense to account for the way that the universe is ordered.²⁰

In other words, the Latin origins of our modern terms “inform” and “information” already bore within them a complex set of meanings. Those meanings were, as Peters shows, expanded and extended in the middle ages, developing a “cluster of senses” that depended on the environment, the epistemological ground, and social practices of a given era. Varying epistemological environments shape the definitions and uses of information, and in so doing moved the term across a series of related but sometimes quite disparate meanings that ran, as Peters shows, from the Latin *in-formare* (to shape from within) to seventeenth-century English’s *informing* as “animating” or “making vital,”

¹⁷ And we recognize of course how, then, information becomes a faceless threat in the era of government and corporate surveillance and big data.

¹⁸ Peters, “Information,” 10.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

to the British empiricists' notion of *information* as “in-forming the senses.” The crucial turn in this history comes, however, in the eighteenth century, as “information” breaks from its status as a lively and active shaper of the world, an in-former of individual mind and matter, and comes to rest in its more modern, passive mien. Information loses its groundedness in form. By the twentieth century, it is a formless quantity passively floating across networks, waiting to be decoded, transmitted, and stored.

Information thus has a much longer and far more complex history than its modern meaning suggests—as one learns from Peters as well as from a host of other historians and media archaeologists who have given us, in recent years, a new prehistory of the concept.²¹ Before our modern definition as a form-independent, bit-sized morsel, as a sequence of signals travelling through noisy channels, or as a reducible fact, the term *information* included in its understandings a wide range of activities that could contribute and “give form” to perceptions of the world (and the cosmos beyond it). When we begin to consider this wider range of information’s shifting, compromising, and changing history as conceptual activity underlying the term *information*, we open ourselves to a whole new set of questions. Imagine someone asking “what is information?” today. They would perhaps want to know where its source lies or who its intended recipient is, where and how information “exists” (in particles, molecules, words, patterns, bits, etc.), or what skills or instruments one would need to either recognize or access it. All these are valid questions under the modern premise of information as factual units of knowledge or “items of new knowledge,” working towards establishing the framework for determining “what” information “is” and how we can responsibly identify the conditions surrounding its production.

But what the historians’ work on the contentious and dynamic history of information allows us to recognize is that treating information as a reducible unit or item is only possible when we

²¹ See Blair, *Too Much to Know*; Nunberg, “Farewell to the Information Age”; Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge*.

narrow its task to very specific environments. Such a narrowing may serve us well in areas where it makes way for enormous advances and developments (in the natural and social sciences, communication technology, and computation), but it leaves humanist fields with a poorer and exclusively symptomatic concept of information. To ask “what is information?” is, then, only one of many ways to approach the term that has given our age its name, one that already assumes we know the epistemological structures that produce something like “information.”

For this task, thinking the history of “information” is not enough. We must think the practices of information. Here our guide will be the German philosopher of science Peter Janich. For Janich, the fundamental mistake of modern conceptualizations of information lies in their reliance on late nineteenth- and twentieth-century attempts to treat “information” as a purely scientific concept stripped from its cultural practices. This “naturalization” of information, of understanding information as a natural object existing outside the activity of human thought and society, and not as a product of culture, Janich argues, leads to a series of mistaken assumptions about the nature of information as a human practice. Janich’s critique more generally aims at philosophies of science, which paved the way (via Descartes) for a “programmatically claim to make information exclusively or primarily the object of the natural sciences,” thereby allowing the modern information-concept to exist with complete indifference to its underlying human functions.²² By the time Shannon and Weaver formulate their mathematical theory of information, it does not take much, Janich writes, to complete the transformation of information into a “naturalized object”—a transformation from which our modern information concept has yet to recover. Why was this possible? Because, as Janich notes, the development and modernization of communication, its technologies, and its mechanisms allowed for information to manifest its social role as the pure content of processes, as a quantifiable unit independent from form. As a consequence of this newly

²² Janich, *Was ist Information?*, 22.

emphasized formlessness, of the invention of new tools for describing and developing communication processes, information's essence and functions disappeared from critical, sociological, and epistemological view. What mattered was that information could be clearly defined as the *object* of a number of technical processes and, in fact, could be organized and manipulated without regard or account for human interests and behavior. Both the mathematical, "naturalized" conceptualizations of communication and their implications for how we use information colloquially in daily life contributed to the detachment of information, Janich insists, from its roots in everyday, fundamentally cultural, human practices.

Here is where Janich's critique aims to change the modern (and, for Janich, false) concept of information. "I want to insist," Janich writes, "that it is philosophically relevant that processes which in engineering-speak go by 'control' or 'regulation' have as their basic conceptual and practical ground activities of ordinary human life."²³ The language of information theory, aiming at describing technological processes, borrows from a wide array of cognitive terms without ever accounting for their underlying human functions: "sending," "receiving," "transmitting," or "storing" information all make use of verbs that have to do with "activities of ordinary human life," with practices shaped by human-to-human interaction as well as human interaction with the natural and social world. Even when information systems and information metaphors can be useful models for human processes (for example, in explaining how the brain works using the model of a city's telephone network²⁴), they cannot replace and account for human intention, functions, or responsibility:

The all-too-common confusions that plague contemporary naturalism and its subfields (empiricism, epistemological realism, and scientific formalism) all begin when the modeling of nature by artifacts forgets that the artifacts and their functions themselves express, and are determined by, the achievements and demands of human culture.²⁵

²³ Ibid., 50.

²⁴ Ibid., 176.

²⁵ Ibid., 177.

When information theory attempts to explain what information is, it can only do so by taking informational artifacts and metaphors for granted. There is no “information” without thinking first about why and how humans communicate, why they might want to inform each other about things. Any humanist theory of information ought to *begin* with those practices, seeing them as the ground for further philosophical elaboration. What the mathematical theories of information fail to acknowledge, Janich writes, is that all practices of communication follow specific human intentions and aim to fulfill human, goal-oriented functions.

Janich, like Peters, thus shifts the conceptual and historical definition of information from a context- and medium-independent “content” to the practices that lead to the act of *informing*. Both focus their attention on the term “information,” showing that we will have a better theory of information if we include in our contemporary concept a longer and more complex history of the term. Janich’s effort to redefine the information-concept takes things, however, a step further than Peters, since it opens up the possibility that a history of information will have to include a history of practices that do not involve the term information at all. We cannot be content with thinking information merely from within the structures established through and by the modern information-concept, structures that would, as Janich writes, “forget the demands of human culture.” If we take seriously Janich’s claim that communication is a form of human action, and that we need to pay specific attention to the circumstances, functions, and practices of these actions, it would seem equally true that people engage in information practices even when they do not know that they are using “information” or information at all. That is, the practices underlying a more complete, humanistic, definition of information take place even where the *term* information is not involved, take place in any situation in which one might see and recognize practical implications for certain patterns of human interaction.

The Information Triangle

This dissertation thus sets out to identify such practices where, at the same time as information theory claimed information as a naturalized and quantifiable object, they have seemed to most resist their informational demands: in, that is, poetry. When Wittgenstein writes that a poem “is not used in the language-game of giving information,” his insistence on the distinction between *speaking poetically* and *giving information* reminds us not only that poetry behaves unlike everyday language (and must be understood and read accordingly), but also that in doing so it provides a definition of *information*.²⁶ Opposed to poetry, information denotes the distinctly non-poetic functions of language: to inform, to *give* information.²⁷ Information in Wittgenstein’s sentence reflects the latest iteration of the term’s historical shift from an active role in shaping the world to a passive function as an “item of knowledge” or “giving someone a report.”²⁸ From the perspective granted by Peters’s historicism and Janich’s culturalism, Wittgenstein is both right and wrong: right if his quote refers to the specific iteration of information as a passive concept, wrong if we are willing to include (or re-include) in our information-concept the practices that shape it. The admonition makes of poetry and information an effortless pair, partly because the modern assumption of information’s passivity tells us what poetry is not (information), and in turn what information is not (poetry). But it does not require an inquiry into their practices: the opposition acquires its validity via negation and, on another level above its own internal structure, by *symbolically* constructing two opposing poles. “Poetry” and “information,” if we read them as symbolic placeholders for certain linguistic functions (or language-games), do not make any claims to their workings as cultural practices, but rather signify specific aspects associated with either the complexity of poetry or the straight-forwardness of information. By symbolism, the pair retroactively reinforces a variety of related

²⁶ In the original German quote, there is not mentioning of “information,” which appears only in the English translation of the German “Mitteilung.” See Chapter 2.

²⁷ If information’s verb is *to give*, what is poetry’s verb?

²⁸ Peters, “Information,” 11.

antagonistic qualities to each of its sides: abstractness versus concreteness, imagination versus facticity, unity versus unit.

It is nonetheless easy enough to see that any understanding of poetry that does not take account of the wide diversity of its practices, and the forms of culture, tradition, environment, and history that produce it—that reduces it instead to symbol of a generic opposition—would be radically incomplete. Poetry is more than its opposition to information. Of course. But information is also more than its opposition to poetry.

The task is then, in considering the historical and cultural practices grounding our information-concept, to reexamine what separates “poetry” from “information,” “poetic” practices from “informational” practices. That is the task of this dissertation. Taking information’s historicity (Peters) and culturalism (Janich) seriously requires an urgent recalibration of the “omnipresent idol,” whose “great cultural power in the late twentieth century is that it presents a clear solution to the thorny problem of regulating of human relations.”²⁹ And yet we can begin that recalibration from the idol’s sense of itself—from its treatment of a wide range of processes and exchanges—in human interaction, nature, and technology—as essentially problems in the *storage, transmission and organization of information*. Storing, transmitting, and organizing information are, in other words, not only informational practices that allow us (or our technologies) to circumvent the “thorny problem” of human involvement, but also very good descriptions of fundamentally human problems and goals (as Janich would suggest), descriptions, that is, of human practices that do not simply get invented with the development of electrical communication media.

The three chapters of this dissertation each focus on one side of this information triangle.³⁰ Chapter 1, on storage and memory, looks at three minor examples of poetry as technology of storing

²⁹ Ibid., 9.

³⁰ It is worth noting that the poles of this triangle differ in an important way from Friedrich Kittler’s well-known description of “information systems.” Kittler writes that “Informationssysteme im engen Wortsinn sind...auf

and as medium of memory: the storage capacities of Homeric verse, the care and recovery for an almost-forgotten object in Eduard Mörike's poem "Auf eine Lampe," and the ephemeral materiality of media in William Gibson's "Agrippa (Book of the Dead)." My major example is Ernst Meister (1911-1979), the Büchner-Prize winning poet who, unlike his contemporary Celan, has largely remained on the margins of the post-war canon of German literature. Meister's poems offer a challenging test case for grounding the post-information theory memory-storage relation in poetic practice. His poems are not in any obvious way about information or poetry's engagement with informational forms (as are, for example, the works of Günter Eich, Andreas Okopenko, Oskar Pastior, or the concrete poets). They do not, on the surface, present themselves as apparent examples of poetry in opposition to information, or as purposeful adaptations of informational practices like lists, encyclopedias, or algorithms. His poetry is also not in any direct sense *about* memory—which distinguishes him in a critical way from the major poets of his (post-1945 German) generation. Nonetheless, Meister's work highlights one longstanding, traditional aspect of poetry's ongoing and historical relation to information in all its human, cultural guises: the practices of memory and storage. Through them, we begin to see clearly Meister's commitment to make visible how poetry formally engages remembering/storing, and how we might read Meister against the backdrop of an emerging information-concept that all too casually takes the analogies between human practices and machinic operations for granted.

Chapter 2, on transmission and communication, focuses on the concept of *Mitteilung*, translated variously as message, communication, information. My goal here is not to reconcile these various meanings, but to trace the term's rich translational genealogy as a way to recalibrate the contemporary conceptual field of information. Such a recalibration begins with the recognition that

Speicherung, Verarbeitung und Übertragung von Nachrichten optimiert." See Kittler, "Geschichte der Kommunikationsmedien," 66. The addition of "organizing" to Kittler's list grows out of conversations with colleagues at Penn State's Center for Humanities and Information.

in the idea of the message, and in the concepts of information, communication, media, and *Mitteilung*, a series of contested concepts legitimize each other to produce specific trends, discourses, and definitions—whether they concern, as they do for Soren Kierkegaard, communication and human subjectivity, or, as they do for Walter Benjamin, language and human expression, or, as they do for Oswald Egger, for poetry. Egger (born 1963), a contemporary Southern Tyrolean poet writing in German, is the chapter’s major poetic example.

As for Chapter 3, it addresses poetic form as practice of organization in Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock’s (1724-1803) poetry and poetic theory. His “grammatical poetics” and his revolutionary attention to the “word” as main metrical unit led him to reorganize German versification. To understand German poetic language in the qualitative terms of sound and rhythm rather than to continue the application of the Greek and Latin quantitative meter was, for Klopstock, not only a project defining the “Germanness” of poetry. It was, more importantly, an exercise in thinking poetry’s organizational capacities, an exercise, that is, in composing the structures which produce a poem’s informational ecology. Among other things the chapter addresses Klopstock’s use of “grammar” as poetic utopia, as a tool of organization that brings together ideology and poetics, sentiment and reason, measure and melody.

At stake in the history of communication concepts, then, is not simply the nature of information itself—not the definitive pinning down of a single structure or single meaning—but rather an *entire social field*. This field is both a matter of practice and, more importantly for our purposes here, of conceptual activity. My argument in what follows is that thinking about information (whether in the immediately modern context, or before it) would do well to recognize that “information” is only one name for a series of concepts operating both within and across multiple traditions and languages. We will not know what “information” means and does, in terms of its effects in the social, and its ability to describe human habits and practices, until we know what

the field in which it operates looks like, and until we understand the various other concepts that mediate, adumbrate, or translate it.

Chapter 1, Storage : Memory

1. Feats of Memory: Homer's Formulae of Memory

In 1993, John Basinger, a 58-year old retired teacher from Middletown, Connecticut, stepped on his treadmill and began to recite the first couple of lines of *Paradise Lost*, John Milton's epic poem. A teacher of theatre, he had memorized text before, and was no stranger to performing poems and parts at various occasions. But that morning, pacing his steps to the rhythm of the machine, he thought, "why not something really challenging like, oh, 'Paradise Lost?'" This athletically exclaimed challenge to memorize the long and difficult text would lead to a first-time performance of Milton's entire poem. Eight years later, he stood on the stage of an auditorium in the small town's community college and recited over the course of three days all of *Paradise Lost* by heart.

The Middletown man's devotion to the viva voce exercise of recollecting, reciting, and retelling verse is not merely historically unusual. It does not merely allow us a moment's nostalgic reflection on a lost golden age; nor is it just a virtuoso performance of the capacities of the human mind. His recitation of Milton's 10,565 lines also reminds us of something poetry has taught, and practiced, in all its eras and ages. It tells us something about the work of memory, the work of poetry, and the work they challenge us to do every time we read a book, memorize a poem, or remember a famous quotation. And it tells us that our engagement with art inherently belongs to their work.

Anyone who's ever memorized a poem knows some poems are easier to remember than others. It is much less challenging to memorize rhymed lines than unrhymed lines, short than long stanzas, figurative than obscure language, and storylines than fragmentary images. A couplet like "Come live with me and be my love / And we will all the pleasures prove" is hard to forget once its iambic tetrameter and slant rhyme makes its rhythm familiar to our ears. Memorizing even the

beginning of *Paradise Lost* (“Of man’s first disobedience, and the Fruit / Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste / Brought death into the world, and all our woe”) is significantly harder than Marlowe’s.³¹ The mnemonic virtues of rhymes, brevity, and clarity ease our laborious efforts to recite from mind. These efforts subordinate a poem’s single units for the reward of a whole and a sense of closure, turning instance into story, particular into pattern, monad into system. This is true for anything from Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” to the entirety of Goethe’s “Zauberlehrling” or the noble restlessness of Tennyson’s “Ulysses.”

Poetic forms, we know, produce a kind of kinship with memory. As basic mnemonic devices they help to remember what a poem is about, sometimes to communicate knowledge about how many days there are in a month, at other times to commemorate a hero’s deeds or a long-lost love. A narrative poem like *Paradise Lost* strains these simple efforts partly with its unrhymed blank verse, and more urgently with its expanded realization of wholeness. The first understanding of the latter is simply that difficulty grows with length, that the more it is we have to remember, the more effort it takes to hold it in our minds. We can remember small amounts of information for a short time, but it takes some effort for larger amounts to remain in our memory. What this means more widely is that any relation between such effort and length, amount, or largeness is what all of our concepts of memory draw upon. And while we today have many ways to understand these relations’ mechanics (linguists, neuroscientists, and cognitive psychologists have provided us with some), though in fact we understand better than we ever have how and why we memorize, memorialize, and remember, we have continued to treat poetry as though it were merely an instance of the memory-process, as though its mnemonic features were epiphenomena in the service of its communication. What if instead we say that at one point in human time and history, poetry created memory?

³¹ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 3.

Memorizing poems carries little of its golden age prestige in most contemporary cultural interaction with poetry. Somewhere between poetry readings and performances of slam poetry, the recitation of poems from memory occurs as a rare novelty, a connoisseur's devotion, or dreaded school exercise. Some might mourn the outdatedness of such memorization exercises as a symptom of the general decline of poetry's status in today's society and education; others a symptom of our growing reliance on media for recording, storing, and reading (a becoming consuming) of literature. Equally rattled by astounding displays of human memory like Basinger's performance, these two concerns draw together our most important tasks of memory: first, the practice and procedure of remembering and second, the systematic organization of these practices and attention to them. Still today, poetry remains the site of these tasks as a set of memory practices. The duality of both these tasks, we will see, governs much of what is considered to be the memory of poetry.

In November 2010, the year of Beringer's abbreviated fame, the classicist Martin West addressed the members of the renowned American Philosophical Society with a well-nigh millennial question: did one of our most established literary figures really write the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*? How can we know if Homer actually existed and wrote these two so widely known epic poems? Or is he merely a mythical figure, the poems having been written by someone else entirely? Are they really two single poems or collections of loose songs, fragments, and episodes? Homeric scholars have debated these problems for centuries, allowing this collocation of uncertainties to become commonly known as the "Homeric Question," the definition of "the relationship between the tradition and the individual creative poet."³² Herodotus, Plato, and Aristotle wrote about Homer and interpreted his texts, as did Alexandrian scholars, who commented and edited manuscripts (known as *σχόλια* "scholia," the Greek word for "interpretation"). In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, scholars like Robert Wood, Giambattista Vico, Gregor Wilhelm Nitzsch, and Friedrich

³² West, "The Homeric Question Today," 385.

August Wolf returned to the question and its unsolved problems; they were followed by Milman Parry, Gregory Nagy, Egbert Bakker, and Martin West in the twentieth and twenty-first century.

These later approaches are divided into Analyst, Unitarian, and later Oralist arguments about the tradition of the texts.³³ While Analysts assert that the poems had to originate from various sources, tales, and authors based on the many formal inconsistencies, haphazard repetitions, and narrative discrepancies throughout the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Unitarians insist on the poems' unity, integrity and authority as single-authored works. The Analysts entertained the idea that the *Iliad*'s twenty-four books came together as a composition of songs and rhapsodes performed and sung over a long period and only afterwards compiled as one poem. Friedrich August Wolf in his 1795 published *Prolegomena ad Homerum*, for example, argued that the tales had been composed and passed on by various poets for centuries before they were collected and written down as Homer's epics. Gregor Wilhelm Nitzsch (in the 1820-30s), on the other hand, traced the poems' structural unity back to a single author's intention.

By the twentieth century, Oralist arguments overtook these Analyst and Unitarian approaches to focus on the structure, architecture, and cultural memory of the verses' creation. Returning to Vico's implication that "the Homeric poems were not the creation of one man but of the whole Greek people," Milman Parry and his student Lord Albert formulated an oral theory of folkloric transmission and memory, relying on the fundamental insight that "Homer was an illiterate bard."³⁴ This autobiographical skepticism was less an ad hominem attack than a reconceptualization of orality as a primary process of the cultural production of tradition, preservation and memory.³⁵ To explain the poems' inconsistencies and paradoxes, Parry and Lord meticulously analyzed the *Iliad*'s and the *Odyssey*'s linguistic, grammatical, and structural features, coming up with an oral-

³³ Parry and Parry, *The Making of Homeric Verse. The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*; Nagy, *Homeric Questions*; West, "The Homeric Question Today"; Knox, "Introduction."

³⁴ Knox, "Introduction," 18.

³⁵ In 1982, Walter Ong would publish his theory of orally structured memory based on Parry's discoveries. See Ong, *Orality and Literacy*.

formulaic theory of composition in their 1920s and 30s papers on the making of Homeric verse.³⁶ The inconsistencies, they argued, so far seen as proof that the poems lacked unity, were the side-product of a highly organized and formulaic structure of versification.

An example of such a structure was the frequent usage of epithets—descriptive or qualifying words attributed to nouns. Achilles, for example, repeatedly appears as “swift-footed” (πόδας ὠκύς, ποδαρκής, ποδώκεος), “breaking armed ranks” (ρήξινορος), “lion-hearted” (θυμολέοντα) or “god-like” (θεοῖς ἐπιείκελ’).³⁷ These ornamental adjectives, according to Parry and Lord, are not merely enhancing descriptions of the hero; they were chosen and combined to fit the strict dactylic hexameter the epics were composed in. Meter trumps meaning, so to speak; such was the function of these formulae. In Greek meter, based on pronunciation rather than stresses, a combination of adjectives and nouns must vary in metrical value depending on the remainder of the line—a constraint that produced inconsistencies, vagueness, or contradiction in meaning, and simultaneously provided a compositional aid that amounted to a system of pre-memorized patterns of language gathered together in a collective, and cultural, bardic toolbox. The formulae were mechanisms designed to help the hexameter carry story, enhance suspension, or extend narrative space and time.

For Parry and Lord, the length of the Homeric poems and the extensiveness of this formulaic system provided striking evidence the formulae must have developed as part of a long oral tradition of storytelling: “by definition and by necessity, therefore, the formula and the formula type are part of the technique which Homer used to express his ideas in his poems.”³⁸ Rather than being caught up in a debate about whether there was one poet who single-handedly composed the poems, Parry and Lord’s refutation of authorial ownership sought to prove another point: that the tradition

³⁶ His collected papers on the making of Homeric Verse were published by Adam Parry, Milman Parry’s son in 1971.

³⁷ Parry and Parry, *The Making of Homeric Verse. The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*, 92.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

of orally transmitted songs and stories extends to the written poem, and that formulaic aids such as noun-epithets function as poetic devices capable of preserving and transmitting ideas. Parry's structural analysis of Homeric style saw "tradition" as a distinctive poetic mechanism that linked oral composition to what we now access as written poem. Long before influence and intertext became a matter of inscribed and memorized meaning, they recognized in Homeric verse a kind of poetic memory that used formulae as technique and Homer's Greek meter as technology for producing such memory.

Speaking not quite a century after the publication of Parry's first work in the late 1920s, Martin West did not attempt to provide a definitive answer to what remains one of the great unsolved mysteries in literary history. But the Homeric Question, yet and perhaps forever unanswered, invites us still today to look at once very far back and very near in historical time. Between then and now the history of the Homeric question records much more than its own enigmas: it paved the way for thinking about how orality works as a form of literary production, textual ontology, and poetics. Whether we owe the preservation of the two epics to Homer himself, to a scribe in Homer's service, or to centuries of retelling and collecting by various poets and performers, the mystery's most exciting possibility is that the theories of composition Homeric scholars have debated for centuries could all in one way or another be true, and that all are possibilities of memory's practices, and of the technical and technological capacities of poetry.

In the meantime, the Question's own institutional memory has produced discourses and metadiscourses addressing memory in many ways: the epics' history of preservation and transmission, their material and textual "survival," their authorial ownership via restoring Homer's biography, the tradition of scripture and cultivation of knowledge, and, as a result, more generally the anthropological, social, and critical concepts of orality and literacy. This long history of reading, translating, retelling, and interpreting the Homeric tales has its own archive of documenting how

these transformations have created the author Homer and his poems, also transforming what it means to perform textual scholarship and literary criticism, from Alexandria's Ptolemaic librarians to New Media scholars.³⁹ Altogether their practices of defining how to read these poems, to determine how to justify treating them as oral, folkloristic songs or written and edited poems, have shaped histories of understanding what it means to memorize and remember poetry, not only as a leftover ancient form of recitation, but, most prominently with Parry's insights, a mnemonic mechanism of poetry itself.

Let's briefly return to Basinger, whose name you'll likely have forgotten by the end of this chapter. Without revealing his exact mnemonic strategies and approaches, Basinger said he spent years studying and learning the poem, and that, in order to memorize *Paradise Lost* he had to know it so well that no unfamiliarity could disrupt his memory of the poem. "I think of the poem in various ways," Basinger describes his approach, "as a cathedral I carry around in my mind, a place that I can enter and walk around at will."⁴⁰ The spatial metaphor of a magnificent building Basinger invokes in the poem is not just a descriptive one; it is one of the oldest mnemonic devices we know. Take, for example, Cicero's telling of Simonides' traumatic experience surviving the collapse of a dining hall in *De Oratore* (55 BCE). Simonides, because he was able to construct in his mind a spatial image of the hall and the dinner table, could precisely list and identify all dinner guests who died in the crashing building. Still today, the method of *loci*, creating a "memory palace" (a structure of rooms, hallways, and furniture) and translating, for example, a poem, party guests, a couple of thousand random

³⁹ See, for example, Bakker, "Homer as an Oral Tradition." To understand a "modern" concept like hypertext through pre-digital texts has recently become a way of both emphasizing and minimizing the novelty of such media "newness." In the spirit of "always already," the new and the old are connected by their differences and similarities; this is nothing surprisingly adventurous, but a reflection of how history might work across and between tenses rather than their continuation.

⁴⁰ Seamon, Punjabi, and Busch, "Memorising Milton's *Paradise Lost*," 502.

numbers⁴¹, or any kind of information into an organization of architectonic images is a core memory technique of *ars memoriae*, the art of memory.

While translating verse into spatial metaphors may have been a part of Basinger's memorization technique, to "know the poem well" isn't merely familiarization with its content; it is also the attention to its form as organizational principle. Basinger's memorization of Milton's entire poem engages with poetry as art that provokes memorization. Though we don't know for sure whether Basinger used a method of *loci* or a similar mnemonic technique to learn the poem, his years-long dedication to commit its thousands of lines to memory required a serious effort that tested the man's limits of his capacity to store and recall a substantial amount of information. For this challenge, it didn't really matter which or what kind of poem he chose, but rather the quantitative dimension and slightly more complex meter and unity of the single epic as opposed to a collection of nursery rhymes, or even formally further away, a telephone book. There's something about *a poem* that lends itself to memorization, to the challenge of memory's capacity.

Milman Parry knew this. But for him, this capacity was not just a human one, and neither was that challenge a mere symptom of poetry. The fabric of Homeric formulae and organization as mnemonic technique, he discovered, were features of how the poems collected, organized, and stored information to be passed on and remembered. If the bards and singers didn't use the written word on the paper to hold that information, he argued, language itself must have developed mechanisms to make that task possible. Homeric noun-epithets are just one of such means of order and storage, which, together with other formulae, make up something like an algorithmic structure of the Homeric literary schema. Fundamentally generative of how poetry is composed and transmitted, these algorithms take advantage of the syllables and feet of a particular meter to produce meaning and memory. With each formula, the poems accumulated a repertoire of relatively

⁴¹ As World Memory Champion Wang Feng did, memorizing 2660 numbers in one hour, in 2011.

stable repetitions and redundancies, which then allow for deviations, improvisation, and an array of even mocking its own restrictions. If we, alongside Parry, read the Homeric poems as poems in the making, our definition of “poem” would also have to include its structural production as a kind of internal memory. And so we arrive at the two kinds of memory: one to learn a poem, and one for the poem to learn.

Parry has given us some understanding of how a poem can do such learning. Formulae such as the bards’ aides-mémoires were, if we were to choose a textual metaphor, woven into the fabric of the narrative and grew in number (more than in variety) with the length of the Homeric meter. The rate of occurrence of, for example, adjectives to describe Achilles through epithets and similes is in this way a form of learning by repetition that is also in the nature of formulae, algorithms, and patterns. And also of basic description: what we learn of Achilles’ character, the representation of his emotions, decisions, and actions are tied into the recognition of both the formulaic meter and their inherent reminders of being *about* Achilles. Later, this will become a feature of ekphrastic poetry often modeled after Homer’s famous description of Achilles’ shield in the *Iliad*.⁴² The description of the shield towards the end of Book XVIII is both about the shield as object and its detailed imagery, as well as about the poetic invention of Achilles and the war. As we follow from line to line, the narration progresses with “endless” formulaic insertions⁴³, creating their own poetic evidence and traces in the words of a narrator whose account of the shield’s origin and existence we are inclined to trust and rely upon.⁴⁴ How else would we remember an object, even an object that may have never existed, other than in its verbal description? The act of remembering is so intimately

⁴² Not only by Virgil and Auden, but as a mode of ekphrasis more widely.

⁴³ Subject phrases and hemistiches like “and then she answered him” τὸν δ' αὖτε προσέειπε (94) “and then she replied” τὸν δ' ἠμείβετ' ἔπειτα (127, 428, 462, etc.), “and so she spoke” ὣς φάτο (145), see also Parry and Parry, *The Making of Homeric Verse. The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*, 10ff. The description progresses with insertation such as “and on it” ἐν δὲ (573, 590, 606, etc.), and “then he [Hephaistos] fashioned/made” τεύξε ἄρα/ δὲ.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 423ff.

tied to language that we begin to wonder why anyone would doubt that there is a kind of memory that a poem teaches us.

In placing Basinger's memorization besides Parry's discovery of formulaic mnemonic devices, we've begun to see how memory is a function of the performing mind, a means of tradition and transmission inscribing shared expressions into narrative experiences, and a particular practice of poetry. Following these examples of poetry's relation with memory, the rest of the chapter will show that poetic memory has all along modeled and continues to shape our general concepts of memory. Memory's poetic grounding in the practices of information, such a theory claims, diffuses tempting modern notions of memory being expressed or finding purchase *in* poetry rather than being inherently poetic, or, a practice inherent to the poem. A poem can be an "archive," "monument," "memorial," "medium," or materialize their commemorating and recording tasks, yes, but in addition to memory finding its way into the poem as *aboutness* or trope poetry has also long created the conditions of these metaphorical spaces mnemonic structures as a kind of *poiesis*.

What's more, this poetic responsibility for memory can no longer be separated from memory's informational function. "In discussing the acts of memory," Mary Carruthers writes, "we can be concerned with three quite separate matters: first, what is the actual origin of information entering the brain; second, how is that information encoded (...); and third, how is its recollection best stimulated and secured."⁴⁵ Carruthers' casual assumption that memory involves information accounts for "acts of memory" as processing and transforming information in the human mind. But we need to qualify the terms of this question to understand it. For if we now think of memory as information, that is, as organization, communication, and process of discrete signals, we risk to either see the poetic and the informational emerging as antipodes to each other, or sacrificing the cultural and poetic tradition of such an informational practice for a naturalized, factual-scientific

⁴⁵ Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, 19f.

understanding of memory. Poetry, memory, information: if we attempt to understand memory in its relation to poetry, and on the other hand describe memory in terms of information, we either lose sight of the triumvirate's historical nexuses and syndetic relationships, or smooth out the complexities among them. Instead, any poetics today ought to consider and test the limits of matters close and distant to the terms it intends to establish and defend.

2. Artifacts of Care: Eduard Mörike's Recovered Objects

If we take seriously Carruthers's description of memory as a tripartite process of information (origin—encoding—recollection), we might begin to attempt a reading of poetry as if it were an expression of such a series of procedural actions. As if a poem were, then, not a mere vessel for memory or a tool to store what's memorable, but something fundamentally engaged in creating processes of information, one of which would be called "memory."

Carruthers gives us a way to think about what we mean when we use "remembering" as a *verbum sentiendi*, an "act of memory" formed through thought and speech. What the verb describes, Carruthers writes, is a chain of transformations channeled through our brains, starting with an origin and ending with the recollection of an original source.⁴⁶ The communication of anything that becomes a memory during this transformation is what we call information; information that is encoded, that enters our brain, and then leaves again when we recall or retell it. When we remember, Carruthers says, we partake in a basic communicative routine between two points A (origin) and B (recollection), trying to retrieve an original source as best as we can when we produce a memory of its past.

The process seems clear, but we also know from experience (we forget things) and from communication technologies (bad cell phone reception or other "noisy channels") that between

⁴⁶ Ibid., 19.

origin and recollection things get fuzzy. We also know that remembering includes faulty memories, conscious changes, and accidental errors, that all of these make up part of our relation to history and organization of time (both past and present). The ways we control information has therefore both miniscule and immense implications for our sense of being in the world. Trauma and memory studies have taught us that witness accounts of crimes or genocide can be true even when information about details, dates, or surroundings are remembered differently from how they are documented elsewhere.⁴⁷ Historical research, too, knows that records of events are not written outside of political, social, or economical institutions that select and interpret them. And studies using “big data” have made us aware of how the availability and vastness of information changes our moral relation to privacy, data protection, or the “right to forget.” In all these engagements with past and present, the conscious and unconscious acts of remembering and definitions of information interpenetrate in one way or another the process from origin to recollection, altering its impact, and its accuracy—altering indeed what we might mean by the words “origin,” “recollection,” “impact,” or “accuracy” in the first place.

In Carruther’s model, some of the (procedural) responsibility of accuracy (or truth, or reality) is shifted to *encoding*. In the most basic sense, encoding ensures that there is an origin that can later be recollected. How an original source is encoded, and how its encoding allows us to store, select, represent, and access information determines all these consequences of temporal distances between past events (remembering the childhood home’s yard to be vast and open) and their later recollection (revisiting the yard as an adult and realizing it’s actually a quite small space among other neighboring yards). Encoding can also change an existing origin and re-encode it in different ways. Think, for example, about a joke that gets less funny the more often it is told, or a sentence someone once said to you that you take as a compliment when you feel confident, and as an attack

⁴⁷ See, for example, Felman and Laub, *Testimony*; Agamben, *Was von Auschwitz bleibt*.

when you feel vulnerable. The procedural clarity of the process doesn't assume the moral or comprehensible clarity of its information; this distinction will matter for what we finally understand as information and how it is practiced by memory.⁴⁸

And maybe for what we understand by “the poem.” I read Parry's descriptions of Homeric verse structures as a starting point for thinking about poetry's capacity to store information. Parry's emphasis on verse as an inherently mnemonic practice emphasizes to a remarkable degree poetry's informational structure. Meter, Parry writes, helps organize adjectival descriptions, similes, and characters, and these grammatical restrictions could function as patterns or templates that made memorization easier for the well-travelled ancient singers and poets. Poetry's emergence from oral traditions allowed for (or, since it couldn't be written down, required) the development of techniques to make it easier or even possible to remember and pass on the stories about wine-dark seas and lion-hearted heroes. And so we can say that, structurally and socially, Homeric verse used technologies of memory that would later become models for “storing” information.

So what kind of information does verse “store”? Let's start with the wine-dark sea.⁴⁹ Why would the Aegean be described as wine-dark (οἶνοφ), as resembling either the color or the darkness of wine? Many have thought about the puzzling description of the sea before: wine was less dark, they say, or the sunset more red, the water more alkaline because of the stones. Or Homer was (color-)blind, or the Greeks didn't know what blue was. Some have compared the line to other lines in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* to see if other things were described in similar colors, others have made the argument that Homer wasn't describing the Aegean at all, but the Baltic sea.⁵⁰ Considered a fascinating record of an ancient past, the poem—or rather just this short line—seems full of

⁴⁸ Such distinction often separate “empirical fact” from “moral” (see Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem*), “information” from the “poem” (overwhelmingly in anthologies on teaching poetry; see Perrine, *Perrine's Sound and Sense*; Kennedy and Gioia, *An Introduction to Poetry*), “fact” from “emotion,” “data” from “knowledge,” and so on.

⁴⁹ One start amongst many before: see Wilford, “Homer's Sea”; Rutherford-Dyer, “Homer's Wine-Dark Sea”; Deutscher, *Through the Language Glass*.

⁵⁰ See Vinci, *The Baltic Origins of Homer's Epic Tales*.

possible information about the geographic, meteorological, physical, and cultural history of the world.

But regarding the poem as historical record is to emphasize only one kind of information that can be stored by poetry—namely its capacity to register what one might think of as unconscious “anthropological” truths about the culture that produced it. Others, like Parry, have argued that “wine-dark” wasn’t about describing the sea at all, but a poetic device and formulaic line that fitted the meter better than a word closer to the color Homer actually saw (or didn’t see). Alternatively, the phrase could be a simile relating the sea to attributes of wine other than its color or darkness. Whether we’re more convinced by descriptive or poetic explanations of “wine-dark,” we need to recognize that both types of interpretation engage with information: one with information about the world and chromatic accuracy, the other with information about the meter and structure of the poem. The poem gives us a piece of information, a memory of what the sea might have looked like. Face to face with those words, we choose to believe the poem, that is, to believe the poem as a poem that is telling us something about color or wine or meter or its story, and not just blatantly lying about the color of the sea. (Of course, saying that it was a lie is also *saying something*.) The distinction between the descriptive and aesthetic value of Homer’s wine-dark sea is also a decision about the kind of informational activity, or potentiality, we attribute to the poem. In the poem, the same line can be different kinds of information. Even if it gets the color wrong.

What the examples of Basinger’s Milton and Parry’s Homer suggest, then, is that the expectations to poetic memory are not always the same. One regards the poem as an object to learn, the other as mechanism that itself learns. With Carruthers’ description of memory’s existence as a coming-to-being and of our acts of “remembering” in terms of processing information, we are confronted with deciding whether the poem is one or the other or both at the same time. Is the poem information to be processed and so an “origin” as when one memorizes Milton’s *Paradise*

Lost? Or does the poem engage in a process analogous to memory, since we also know that a poem processes, transforms, and communicates information not *about* itself but as part of what it does as a work of art? Any simultaneity of these mnemonic functions of poetry challenges that between being object and bearing mechanism the poem is both information to be memorized and memorizing information, it exists and it produces.

To see all this is to approach the problem of the poem's ontology. Questions about poetry and memory are also questions about what a poem is and what it does, how to recognize that a poem exists as "a poem." The memory of a poem is not quite a proof of its existence, but we do assign a certain, not insignificant responsibility of "existence" to memory and our ability to remember poems past and present. In their 1948 *Theory of Literature*, Rene Wellek and Austin Warren write:

There are poems or stories which have never been fixed in writing and still continue to exist. Thus the lines in black ink are merely a method of recording a poem which must be conceived as existing elsewhere. If we destroy the writing or even all copies of a printed book we still may not destroy the poem, as it might be preserved in oral tradition or in the memory of a man like Macaulay⁵¹, who boasted knowing *Paradise Lost* and *Pilgrim's Progress* by heart.⁵²

Leave aside for a while that any *theory* of the poem both deals with the poem's "being" and "doing" and at the same time creates the poem as its object, and take a closer look at how Wellek and Warren, half-way through their ontological investigation into the poem as work of art, turn to memory to phrase the poem's existence. "Merely a method of recording": the tie between continuation and existence produces two paths for memory and the poem. The first path involves creating, or imagining, mechanisms that ensure the poem's existence over time, and in/of the spaces through which time passes. This becomes clear in the idea that a poem needs to be "fixed" in a place we can hold accountable, return to, or look at. Such a place is a record; its function is to be a piece

⁵¹ Or Basinger!

⁵² Wellek and Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 130.

of evidence and reference in its flirtation with permanence. What makes such a place precarious is the desire for permanence, rather than actual permanence. We can always *hold* place accountable, but we cannot wish for place to be *too* accountable, for if the place is destroyed the poem might be gone too, which amounts to an awfully risky way of preserving the work of art (or one's faith in it). The record can only be a method built on these mechanisms but not the poem itself (and so we are able to question both the poem and the method).

All this in any case is the first path, the path of a mechanistic or material continuance. The second path is the promise of memory despite all mechanisms, the "elsewhere" of the poem that is independent from continuation, *because* it isn't fixed, and because preservation might not be the same as recording.

If a poem is read aloud by a brave soul in a lonely forest, is it still a poem if no one ever hears it? (Another version of that question: is it communication if no one receives the message?) The philosophical conundrum is also a question about memory and access. For a single person's memory of a poem can either be enough for a poem to exist at all, or there can only "be" a poem through the process of communicating it, and so once there's someone to hear or read it.⁵³ The difference between "recording a poem" and "conceiving it elsewhere" is that one is the idea that a record (and a poem) can exist whether or not it is communicated (it exists before it is destroyed), whereas the other regards the poem as existing through a communicative process (it exists despite the fact that its record is destroyed). What we then describe as communication or process of information might turn out to be what differentiates the object from our knowledge of it, from the poem and its interpretation, and reminds us that the object is tied to the ability to speak of it.

⁵³ Along the lines of this question's thought, the accountability of a record also has to do with countability or a concept of singularity and plurality: is "enough" defined by more than one person, and how many would be needed to hear the poem for it to count as communication?

The memory of a page and the memory of man then appear as two different kinds of memory. Even so their practices produce an ontology of the poem. *Paradise Lost* is *Paradise Lost* whether we read lines on a page or listen to someone perform them. The difference, Wellek and Warren write, is that one is a method of recording, and the other, through the synecdochical Macaulay, an inclusion in a kind of knowledge that preserves it against the threat of its material destruction. The material, they say, only alters the method of recording, whereas (oral) tradition or human memory stores the poem as a form of knowledge or certain ability that is collectively recognizable and accessible. This latter thus *produces* the poem; an effort Maurice Halbwachs attributed to the collective and Jan Assmann would later describe as cultural.⁵⁴ (We also know that, for example, we have Homer's *Iliad* today because of copies and copies of copies that have been preserved over the centuries.)

We seem therefore to have some firm handle on a distinction between several important terms: recording (Wellek and Warren), encoding (Carruthers), or storage on one hand, writing and remembering on the other. The problem is that all these words can be used as metaphors and, what's worse, as metaphors for each other. Writing can mean encoding, memory can mean storage, destruction can mean erasure, a large technological company can "know" things about you, the Internet can't "forget," a library can "store" knowledge, and your calendar "remembers" what you need to get done, and so on. If we describe the poem as a site of "encoding" and "information," we seem to cut out other possibilities (for instance, "memory"). To simply call a process encoding or informational takes a safe distance from some other more traditional sense of what we think poetry does. The proliferation of metaphors and terms gives us the illusion of progress. But in fact in the movement from writing to encoding there may be very little progress at all. Using a new vocabulary to describe how certain things relate to each other (like that of encoding and information) can seem

⁵⁴ Halbwachs, *Das Gedächtnis und seine sozialen Bedingungen*; Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*.

like forward movement (i.e., writing as old, encoding as new technology), but it may just be the other side of a thousand-year old coin using different names for the same thing.

But maybe seeing that is progress too. Take, as a case study, the German poet Eduard Mörike's "Auf eine Lampe":

Noch unverrückt, o schöne Lampe, schmückest du,
An leichten Ketten zierlich aufgehangen hier,
Die Decke des nun fast vergessnen Lustgemachs.
Auf deiner weissen Marmorschale, deren Rand
Der Efeukranz von goldengrünem Erz umflieht,
Schlingt fröhlich eine Kinderschar den Ringelreihn.
Wie reizend alles! lachend, und ein sanfter Geist
Des Ernstes doch ergossen um die ganze Form -
Ein Kunstgebild der echten Art. Wer achtet sein?
Was aber schön ist, selig scheint es in ihm selbst.⁵⁵

The poem is best known as an example of a *Dinggedicht*; a poem that uses detailed descriptions of an object as its visible (and, in the vein of its older ekphrastic traditions, visual) focus. It is a short and complicated poem. It begins with a speaker addressing an ornamented lamp hanging from the ceiling of an almost forgotten bedroom. The ode's longer first part is a melancholic, slightly resigned reflection on the lamp's decoration, color, structure, its place in the room—all the visible traits of the object's unadulterated beauty. Throughout the poem's ten lines, written as strict iambic trimeter, not much "happens" until the last four lines, when the description of the bedroom chandelier shifts to a philosophical investigation into the nature of beauty and the work of art. These lines are the break at which the speaker no longer addresses the lamp, but moves into a short monologue that ends with the poem's famous last two lines, whose ambiguous grammar and the multiple meanings

⁵⁵ Mörike, *Werke und Briefe*, 1:153. Translated by Scott Horton.
Yet unmoved, you beautiful lamp, gracefully suspended
Here by light chains, you adorn
The ceiling of this almost forgotten folly
About your cup of white marble, whose rim
Is enshrouded with a wreath of ivy golden-green,
A group of children join hands in a circle dance.
How charming is this! Smiling, a gentle spirit
Of gravity descends indeed about the image –
An artwork of the authentic form. Who notices it?
True beauty radiates from a light within. Horton, "Mörike's To a Lamp."

of the German word “scheinen” (to seem, to illuminate, to shine) prevents a single interpretation of the poem’s meaning (which of course is also *meaning*).

We could attempt to understand the poem in informational terms and take Mörike’s poem itself as *origin*, its structure, form, and object as way of *encoding* information about a person looking at a lamp written by a poet. In these terms the famous epistolary debate between Martin Heidegger and Emil Staiger—which focused on the poem’s last line and its use of “scheinen” as either poetically (as “illuminate” or “glow”) or philosophically (as “seem”)—would function as a *recollection* of Mörike’s canonical poem.⁵⁶ Or, we could describe what’s happening between the speaker and the lamp as an origin of a memory of a lamp’s beauty (or beauty in general), encoded in the lamp’s ornamental design and features, and recalled by the speaker upon looking at the lamp. Or we could identify the “beauty of the work of art” as the original source, the lamp’s green-golden ivy and dancing children as a kind of encoding, and the poetic self’s marveling description and ultimate ailing question about our ability to recognize the lamp’s beauty as recollection of the definition of beauty.

To decide exactly which part of the poem is “encoding” something seems the most difficult. Origin and recollection are—in Carruthers’ work at least—more stable, functioning as two points in a communicative exchange of information. We can set those points between any two things that interact with each other: a lamp and someone who looks at it, and memory and someone who recalls it, a poem and someone who reads it. The language of communication and information that are used to describe this process assume origin and recollection as well defined ends of information exchange. (Similar, maybe, to the hermeneutic view of the poem as both the source of meaning and of our reading an interpretation of it.) For Carruthers, the difference between the memory and the

⁵⁶ Heidegger and Staiger’s opposing interpretations of the poem’s last line became a striking example of how the poem, and poetic language in general, requests its readings. While Staiger interpreted the last line’s “scheinen” as “to seem” (referring to the latin “videtur,” Heidegger suggested a more literal meaning, “to shine” (“lucet”). The two levels of interpretation, poetical and philosophical, require that one would have to decide whether “scheinen” happens from the object’s point of view, or the viewer/reader’s perception of the object. (See Spitzer, “Wiederum Mörikes Gedicht ‘Auf Eine Lampe’”; Wild and Wild, *Mörike-Handbuch*; Gockel, *Literaturgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte*.)

event that produces it hinges upon how it is encoded, even when it's not clear how exactly these codes work, when they start and finish, and who is responsible for it (neurons? historians? ourselves?). Encoding ensures that there *is* a difference, that there is a relation between a past event and the memory of it.

Via encoding, then, origin and recollection assume some kind of relation. Localized in the human brain, the various meanings and functions of “encoding” can combine neurological, cultural, and social practices. In this anthropological sense it is the human who does the work of remembering and processing information, and memory is the product of our somatic and mental engagement with our knowledge of the past and the present. We know this is where the approximating force of the analogy between human memory and a machine's database comes from, and also where it falters: our biological and creative abilities to influence and alter these codes resist a mechanic flow of information, even as they orient themselves, in dreams, towards a flawless connection between origin and recollection.

So what of the Mörike? It is perhaps too predictable to say that the poem itself comments on the very processes that it performs. Nonetheless, it is true, and the fact that such a commentary is predictable affirms, rather than undermines, the basic contention of this dissertation: that poetry not only processes information but thinks its concept. When Mörike writes that “selig scheint es in ihm selbst” (“radiates from a light within,” or in a different translation, “shines/seems blissful in itself”⁵⁷), the double meaning of “scheinen” is also twofold in its function: the first meaning emphasizes a particular trait of the lamp, while the second meaning leaves behind the particularity of the object to focus on how the object *becomes* itself in front of us. The transition that moves from looking at the lamp to reflecting on its meaning is the beginning of any metaphorical interpretation. The first movement performs process; the second performs commentary. The poem's object, the lamp,

⁵⁷ Slessarev, *Eduard Mörike*, 72.

produces light and illuminates the room, but it becomes a work of art when it also “seems” to us as if it also were something else, something beautiful beyond all earthly tasks and delights, something that makes us ask if it exists for us to notice it.⁵⁸ The lamp, then, is not the poem’s only metaphor; so is its reflection on the meaning of art, which comments on the poem itself. Which is to say: what differentiates the poem from a description of a lamp is that it does something that allows us both to see what the lamp seems to be and to recognize its concept (as “lamp”) without thinking that one is exactly like the other.

Any ode knows this. A speaker addresses an object without expecting a response, but it’s not quite a monologue. (For that matter, poetic monologues are representations or reproductions of speech and therefore not truly monologous.⁵⁹) As a poetic device, the address *to* the lamp is also an address *for* the reader, and the communication with the object also communication with the one who reads it. Mörike’s rhetorical question, “Wer achtet sein?” (“Who notices it?”), is only rhetorical if you think it’s directed towards the object; put to the reader, the question answers itself in the asking.

The question thus illustrates, or enacts, the poem’s double use of memory as both process and comment. This happens in the last two lines of the poem, when the descriptive lines move from a marveling tone to more abstract, philosophical language. The “Wer achtet” and the cryptic last line create this shift, whereby both question and riddle, rather than providing information about the lamp, request an answer from the reader. (A rhetorical question only becomes rhetorical after the answer becomes obsolete.) Notice, also, that these two lines are the only grammatically unusual ones in the poem; they are simultaneously very clear and utterly vague. They achieve this paradoxical quality partly by obscuring the relations of words to each other, so we find a grammatically strange “achtet sein” with a shortened genitive pronoun (“sein” instead of “seiner”), and “selig scheint es in

⁵⁸ “selig” in the original, “true” in Horton’s translation, “blissful” in Slessarev’s version. More common, literal, meanings of the German “selig” include quiet, peaceful, untouched, blessed.

⁵⁹ On Robert Browning’s dramatic monologues, see Tucker, “Dramatic Monologue and the Overhearing of Lyric”; Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, 19.

ihm selbst,” where “scheinen” can refer either to “selig” or to “ihm selbst.” Via the grammatical gender of “sein” (and, more subtly, via the consonance of “achten” and “echten”), we can then establish the question’s relation to the work of art in the sentence before. Relating the state of blissfulness both to the way the lamp shines its light and to the essence of the work of art provides the different readings of shine/seem. In that way, the two lines demand an unraveling of their grammatical logic before any philosophical thought can happen.

As the Heidegger-Staiger debate showed, this syntactical challenge is clearest when one makes the ambiguity of the last line’s “scheinen” the center of the poem’s interpretation. Slightly less ambiguous is the question’s verb, “achten.” Most translations and readings of the line agree that used with a genitive pronoun its foremost meaning is to notice, recognize, or look at. By asking who is noticing the lamp as a work of art, the question steers us towards its ontological inquiry into the work of art in general, culminating in the last line’s “scheinen.” Does beauty, it asks, only exist when someone notices it, or is beauty independent from being recognized and seen? And is the artwork’s beauty inherent in its object or can it only be experienced, as it is in the description in the lines before? These questions are also questions to the poem, for the lamp exists as a work of art in the poem. What makes the poem a poem is that the verbal description of the lamp is not only information about the object. It is also a form and an “achten” that both confirms and defeats the progression of the accumulating descriptions in the poetic lines. Imagine the poem replacing the first eight lines with the line “There is an old lamp in the dark bedroom” (or to keep true to the German iambic trimeter, “Es haengt im dunklen Zimmer eine alte Lampe”). Describing the features of the lamp, Mörike’s poem tells us, is not only about conveying what the lamp looks like, but commenting on description—and poetry—as means of “achten.”

This brings us back to memory. “Achten,” in addition to its instantaneous, visual meaning, also extends to a longer process of watching over or guarding something or someone. To notice the

lamp therefore also ensures that someone else notices it too. The poem makes this shared recognition possible as soon as the reader asks him- or herself the same (rhetorical) question the poetic self asks. Such is the realization of the verb's double meaning. Earlier, I described encoding as producing a difference between event (or object) and the memory of it. Incorporated in the verb's double meaning, "achten" offers two different ways of encoding the lamp's memory. The first, to notice the lamp, is about occasion, access, and the capacity to recognize it and bring it to mind. Awareness of the lamp's existence begins with this recognition of a lingering or forgotten past in the present. The second way, on the other hand, implies that the poem's memory results not only from attention to the lamp, but also fostering to the lamp as object and artwork. "Achten" is both the question that follows the description, and the act of describing that incorporates a split between conscious and unconscious remembering, voluntary and involuntary memory, remembering and memorizing. The intersection of these three fields of play—the question, the description, and their relation—opens on to one possible determination of how a poem remembers. And how it teaches the mechanisms of memory.

Mörike's shining lamp, Parry's account of Homeric verse composition, Beringer's memorization of Milton: all three present us with examples of poetic memory in practice. Carruthers and Wellek and Warren emphasize that, between material and memory, the site where a poem exists amounts to a problem of storage. To store a poem, in both cases, means to keep and make it accessible over time, whether through preservation, or in an archive, a record, a box in the attic, or cultural identity, or the mind. Where to store a poem is also a matter of *how* it is stored, and so, in Carruthers' terms, a matter of encoding. The Homeric Question, bar its suggestive adjective, is not just a search for an author. When Parry and Lord developed their oral-formulaic theory of Homeric verse the question had also become a query into the "existence" of the poem as a work of art. What

at some point we started to call a poem does not begin with the written word, but—and this would later be a central argument for theories of orality and oral literature—with the poetic “mechanics” (via formulae) of verse structure, whether spoken, sung, or told. Even the most tangible of places (a lamp, a library, or a box) are embedded in processes that set out to encode original information for later recollection, processes that ensure that information’s protection, and delineate it as something worth protecting from being destroyed, lost, or forgotten. The problem of storage, then, lays itself out at the fateful intersection of encoding as “being” and encoding as “doing.” Which is to say: to understand memory as an informational practice of poetry, these commentaries on and processes of encoding amount to what we finally understand as poetic, not as a field beyond or opposed to information, but as something present in, and inherent to, the foundation of its practice.

2. Books of the Dead: William Gibson’s Storage Media

A moment ago I imagined Mörike’s poem as modernist commentary on its own memory practice. We can get some further sense of how the problem of storage defines a poetic practice (and vice versa) by looking at science fiction writer William Gibson’s “Agrippa (A Book of The Dead).” To test the informational terms I have associated with poetic practice and used so far—encoding, storage, recollection, and transmission—I want to take Gibson’s multi-medial poem as an example of how poetry works through problems of memory. This hermeneutic choice is framed for us by the poem itself. “Agrippa,” a poem playing with its materiality and medium, in some regards expects us to read it as *working through* memory processes, as exemplification of what memory has learned (and suffered) from its poetic and technological predecessors in the late twentieth century, post-mechanical reproduction age. These expectations, if read as purposeful critique rather than playful mockery, come with a demand to recognize that understanding the concept the poem teaches us is part of the work’s own awareness; it is not a unique result of our interpretative act as readers. To

understand the poem's concept, in other words, may not be the same as grasping its meaning. But for now, let's allow the poem to elaborate its conceptualizations.

First published in 1992, "Agrippa" appeared as part of a collaborative artwork with artist Dennis Ashbaugh and publisher Kevin Begos, Jr. It was a work of memory that encompassed a wide array of familiar notions of memory: to record, store, preserve, and keep, to access, retrieve, recall, and read. This familiarity with storage mechanisms, a closer look at the poem will show, determines much of what the poem presents to us as its memory practice. Such practice begins with "Agrippa's" artwork, which consists of a book designed by Ashbaugh contained in a heavy, black fiberglass case. At the end of the book, the last pages are glued together; a small rectangle cut out in their center stored a floppy disc containing Gibson's poem.⁶⁰ At the time of the artwork's publication, the disc was not meant to preserve: after being viewed once, a code would encrypt the file that contained the poem's text in order to prevent further reading or copying of the poem. This self-destruct mechanism created an enigmatic aura around the poem, launching a hunt on various online forums and platforms to crack "Agrippa's" code and make the text public. Soon after the official presentation of the poem at an event called "the transmission"—a live run of the diskette and a public recitation—emails started to circulate with a notice that the poem's full text was up on the online bulletin board MindVox. Someone had transcribed it from a video recording of the presentation.⁶¹

The revealing of the poem by a resourceful audience and the artistic invitation to crack the code as part of its conceptual framework were "Agrippa's" first real-life test of the crossing through layers of containment to access the work's content. Any answer to what kind of poem "Agrippa" is in this way confronted with the poem's medial and participatory "eventfulness." Where and how the

⁶⁰ Only a few copies of the artwork were actually produced and sold. For a detailed bibliographic description of *Agrippa* see Hodge, "Bibliographic Description of Agrippa (Commissioned for The Agrippa Files)."

⁶¹ For a history of the publication and the subsequent on- and offline efforts to crack the code, see Kirschenbaum, *Mechanisms*. For a description of the artwork, see also Schwenger, "Agrippa, Or, The Apocalyptic Book"; Liu, *The Laws of Cool*.

poem exists is a question “Agrippa” raises from its very beginning. “For all its complex resonances as an object,” Peter Schwenger writes, “*Agrippa* is based on this one idea: a book disappears.” “Agrippa’s” trick, as Schwenger later concludes, is that disappearance is also always a kind of appearance. Imagining a book that disappears, we could say, tells us something about its existence as book, as poem, as memory. Or, any verbal articulation of disappearance is at the same time a representation of its existence, for the truly forgotten would also be forgotten in language. The conspiratorial recovery of the poem, the mystery of its code, were first steps of a dance that contextualized “Agrippa,” its initial transmission, and its material presentation inside a matrix of presence and absence, concealment and a designed failure to conceal.⁶² Here is where “Agrippa” begins its theory of memory. It asks, via its concept, how poetry manages the difference between something gone and articulating its gone-ness as process that matters to how we remember and to our technologies of memory.

Such technologies create a thematic web between the work’s publication history, exhibition, and performance, the book as an object, the poem, and the later publication and online archiving of the whole project.⁶³ We arrive again at an ontological question: what makes the poem exist as a poem? Is there one moment in time—the performance of the floppy disc—that is the poem’s one true moment, and every subsequent description, transcription, and reading of (and about) it a mere reminder that the poem once was a poem?⁶⁴ Or, a poet might argue, were its writing and encryption already a representation of the poem inside the poet’s mind? “Agrippa” doesn’t solve these questions, but its conceptual awareness of its own recording and storing devices and mechanisms (the pages, floppy disk, online forums, the poem published (today) on a website, and even the book’s small ornamental futures such as a DNA code printed on its first page, etc.) invite us to

⁶² In 2012, two decades after its first release, a contest was launched to finally crack the code using the original source code and a system emulator; see DuPont, “Cracking the Agrippa Code.”

⁶³ To view Agrippa’s online archive hosted by the University of Santa Barbara, see Liu, “The Agrippa Files.”

⁶⁴ F.W. Bateson famously asked: “If the Mona Lisa is in the Louvre, where are Hamlet and Lycidas?” See Bateson, *Essays in Critical Dissent*; McLaverty, “The Mode of Existence of Literary Works of Art.”

believe that we can't talk about what something *is* without saying what it *does*.⁶⁵ Behind these layers of technologies lies the poem "itself," which, we will find, is a poem about mechanisms as much as it is part of one, and its own.

The poem "Agrippa" begins with the opening of a book. The book, the poem tells us a few lines later, is an old photo album with photographs from the poetic speaker's family. We learn it belonged to someone by the name Gibson, and follow along a material description of what the album looks like, of its old, black paper, the notes underneath the photos written with white, chalky pencil, and the glue between the Kodak prints and the pages. Looking at the pages, photos, and their captions underneath, more and more snippets of the family's past appear and blend with longer memories of a past present, all connected through various kinds of mechanisms (the photo camera, an incident with a gun, the bureaucracy of war, traffic lights at an intersection). Memory after memory, the poem teaches us its mechanisms as both technological and mnemonic processes, as here:

The mechanism: stamped black tin,
Leatherette over cardboard, bits of boxwood,
A lens
The shutter falls
Forever
Dividing that from this⁶⁶

The lens mirrors a mechanism of memory, which the poem establishes to be twofold. The stanza's beginning lines, "black tin/leatherette over cardboard, bits of boxwood/a lens/The shutter falls," first present a collection of materials. The materials—leather, cardboard, boxwood, and glass—are in some way or another crafted, human-made parts of the camera bearing the mechanism, and let us imagine the early twentieth century camera as an elaborate object of the past. The lines

⁶⁵ Heidegger knew this.

⁶⁶ Gibson, "Agrippa (A Book of The Dead)."

then shift from a description of how the mechanism works to what it does when the lens's shutter is "forever/dividing that from this." Here we encounter a moment in the poem where we are confronted with the clarity of a mechanism prompting a vague outcome. Consider the first line, in which the definite article and the colon after "the mechanism" announce a promise of explanation, but end with the last line's demonstrative pronouns that remain general about what it is that the mechanism actually divides. The camera and its shutter, the stanza seems to tell us, mechanically create a memory when the falling shutter splits a moment into bits, into "this" and "that," recording discrete slices of experience in the photo's static lie. Taking a photograph encodes, if you will, memories in the relationship between the close "this" and the distant "that." Looking at the photo at a later moment in time, then, prompts a nostalgic and regretful regard, whose affect constitutes a resistance to the irreversible divided relation between "that" of the past and "this" in the present. In this mechanism, a memory becomes the past in this new, divided relation to the present, where only it becomes "memory." From the camera's pragmatic and concrete process and its tangible material that underlie its collection of memories, we've arrived at an abstract experience of time's organization, a concept of memory that is located and produced both "in the mechanism" and in the mind.

From the concept we can return to the poem. "Agrippa's" media of storage—the artwork/book, the floppy disk, the photo album, and the photographs—are composed with an awareness of what gets lost in transmission and our quest to access what once was there. They resort to their capacities as technologies to store, but never restore, information. That the disc's code is programmed to make the poem indecipherable after being opened and read makes the poem foremost an object of storage (within the artwork, within the concept), a bundle of information that is stored in a medium designed to store (the book, the disc). What's more is that the poem is itself also a medium of storage. In the simplest way, we could say that it stores the poetic speaker's

experience of looking at preserved photographs as records of cached bits of a family's past. It also draws an episode of his life that is constantly accompanied (or interrupted) by the dividing, clicking mechanism of the shutter—from the opening of the album to the recurring memories of his own past and his organization of the present in awareness of this mechanism in the last lines' "laughing,/in the mechanism." These snapshots fulfill one function of how a relation between encoding, storing, and recollection works, when we read them as synonyms for episodes or fragments of a blurry and vague past that the speaker tries to restore in the present. Recollecting information, the poem-as-object and the poem-as-poem both tell us, is its speaker's—and our—task of reading, decoding (or, in the floppy disc's case, cracking the code), and remembering, perhaps, also as parts of a mechanism.

The example of "Agrippa" shows us how poetry (and art in a larger sense) confronts problems of memory and storage as part of its self-aware poiesis. Gibson's poem and Ashbaugh and Begos's artwork play with a wide variety of layered notions of memory, its media and materiality, and its technological (and digital) synonyms: from the book that stores the floppy disc, the en- and de-coding of that disc, the falling shutter that instantly creates new relations between the past and the present, the photograph as record of family history, and the captions underneath the photos on the page—all include particular ways of processing information as a function of memory. "Agrippa" also demands to include the poem as medium of stored memories and site of recollection. The vagueness of poetic language, its enjambments, caesuras, and ellipses, formally mirrors the poetic speaker's experience of constructing a memory of his past as they blend into his present. Like the self-destructing floppy disc as a moment of erased memory, like the public effort to restore and save the poem, the poem itself is a performance of memory. And, coming full circle, proposes to treat the poem as unit within a system of allegorical relations between memory and its expressions.

“Agrippa” is, in this regard, a simple example, because it is so aware of its mechanisms. It begins to ask what “whole” its circles of relations are a synonym of, and how a poem creates “wholeness” as a system of managing its information. But what if a poem were less aware of its mechanism of storage, less emotional commentary, representation, analogy, or less *about* mnemonic mechanisms?

Maybe the difficulty of memory, as form, as content, as medium, and as a practice, lies in the tension between all the tangible and intangible functions *memory* has to fulfill in the unity of a single word. “Agrippa” explicitly shows us this problem when it tries to reconcile some of its own aspects by making a book, a camera, photographs, and a poem all about memory and their mnemonic functions. But this poses a problem: if we describe memory’s various terms as micro-unities within one system (memory as storage, place, art, process, personification, and so forth), we may, like the blind men describing the elephant, finish by describing a set of parts that do not amount to a whole (if whole there be). One description of memory may not apply to another function; memory in regard to national trauma seems like a very different thing from the memory materialized in the inhuman storage capacities of Google’s data centers. On the other hand, if we try to separate our uses of “memory” into two (or five, or ten) functions and meanings (for history, trauma, literature, metaphor, a photograph, an archive, a code on a floppy disc, the internet) it would put us into a position in which we can only understand “memory” in terms of its specific historical and contextual differences and similarities. Any difference we recognize would pull us into a different direction; any similarity we identify prompts us to exclude from our concept what doesn’t seem to fit; yet the sum of all differences and similarities doesn’t amount to “memory” either; and so on. At the end of these roads, we may be happy to say that someone talking about history and someone about storing data may indeed be talking about two ontologically different problems.

Or a thousand; or one. We will see.

4. Lengths of Space: Ernst Meister's Poetics of Containment

In order to test a more general theory of memory as a poetic practice, to test it not as a particular function, but as a reconciliation of the literal and figurative forces of memory, we need look at poetry that has very little “aboutness” in relation to the topic at hand, poetry that, at least at first sight, is less explicit about its content (both in general and insofar as its content is “about” memory or storage), and maybe even less explicit about its mnemonic task. The remainder of this chapter works therefore towards a theory of poetry’s informational practice by looking at German poet Ernst Meister’s difficult late poems, poems whose minimal, brief, and often enigmatic verse leaves its reader, unlike “Agrippa,” with little instruction in the art of interpretation, and perhaps also (though perhaps also not) little immediate excitement.

The Storage of Haltsamkeit

Ernst Meister begins his last collection of poetry, *Wandloser Raum* (Wall-less Space), with a poem that serves as an epigraph of the whole collection:

Ihr haltsamen
vier, ihr
Ecken der Gegend!⁶⁷

I begin the discussion of storage and memory in *Wandloser Raum* by noticing the curious relation between the title of the collection, which introduces a concept, and the epigraphic first stanza of the first poem in that collection, which presents itself as address both affirming and complicating the titular appellation. The sustaining four corners, in this initial plea of the poetic speaker, extend the title’s paradoxical spatial structure—a room without walls. Together, they set up a problem of what it means to contain: a paradox that is a beautiful and haunting image of an impossible structure; how

⁶⁷ Meister, *Gedichte: 1969-1979. Textkritische und kommentierte Ausgabe*, 3:267. “You sustaining/four, you/corners of region!” Translation by Samuel Frederick and Graham Foust, see Meister, *Wallless Space*, 3.

can a room without walls still be a room? Wouldn't it at once, like a bottomless glass, lose its ability to hold and sustain anything within them, its protective and preserving capacity of anything inside of it from the outside? And how, if this is true, can the speaker be inside a room that doesn't have an inside?

The paradox is the first form of containment the poem presents. It contains, in its form as paradox, the resistance to simply dismissing it as absurd nonsense; at the same time it suggests the impossibility of solving the problem it traps us in. When we try to imagine what kind of space an image like a *wandloser Raum* (wallless space) would signify, either the adjective (wandlos) or the noun (Raum) seems like it must be false. The "room" appears to us as both true (it is a room) and false (it can't be a room if it doesn't have walls), but neither word gives us an option other than their belonging together, and no way to decide whether "wallless" is betraying the meaning of "room" or the "room" the meaning of "wallless."⁶⁸ The logic of the paradox unfolds between adjective and noun, presenting us with an opposition: as a grammatical unit it is correct and "true," but as a concept of space it seems impossible. This opens onto the paradox's capacity to hold both sides of an idea in tension or oscillation and so, from the very beginning, the image teaches us one function of "containment": the grammatically sustained image of a paradox.

The first stanza of *Wandloser Raum's* epigraphic poem carries this dilemma further by setting up a variation of the title's theme in the opposition of "Ecken" (corners) and "Gegend" (region). Here, too, the impossibility of taking shape emerges from a spatial oxymoron that can only be a constant deferral of becoming-space. While a room without walls isn't a room, a region once it has

⁶⁸ It may be worth noting that on an even smaller scale, the German word "Raum" already bears some of the paradox in itself. "Raum" equally implies the English "space/region" and "room" in one word. A "Raum," therefore, can be both a vast and open area (as for example in "Lebensraum"), and also an enclosed, structured unit surrounded by walls, floor, and ceiling (as for example in the English "living room"). "Raum" combines the architectural and general concept of space as antonym, and binds the two oppositional meanings together in the Janus-like word. One of the reasons the paradox works is, paradoxically, because of the adjective negating the meaning of the noun at the same time as it emphasizes it: because of the adjectival "walls," the phrase foregrounds room-ness before it turns to the word's meaning as region, only to then deny the former.

corners is not a region anymore. The German “Gegend” (region) denotes a deictic space, since something that is *zugegen* (present) can only appear in relation to another referent, some site of enunciation. A referent can be the self (“in der Gegend” as my neighborhood), or another, designated place (the surrounding of a school or a landmark, or on a larger scale a mountain range, or other geographic, regional terrain).

“Ecken” (corners), on the other hand, mark some form or another of limitation or reference. Mathematically, they are one of the most precisely defined forms of space (a room’s four corners, for example, all measure the exact same 90-degree angle, all three corners of a triangle amount to 180 degrees exactly, and no corner can be larger than 179 degrees, at which point it would become a line). Contrary to corners, a region has no static, visible, and universal limits. It describes a space present through the speaker/referent, through the one who enunciates it, rather than through physical spatial markers. It is, in this sense, approximation rather than accurate delineation.

As a task of measuring and constructing space the “Ecken der Gegend” extends, or seems to, the “wandloser Raum” paradox. As in the title, the grammatical pairing of two spatial terms undermining each other also contains and sustains their internal coherence. While the room is stripped of its referential structure, a region is suddenly given an impossible one. The group of four corners geometrically draw a figure defining lines and edges, but they cannot possibly be “of region,” for a region, being the sort of vague descriptor that designates a space or region produced by human or geological activity, has no corners; if it had corners, it would not be a region. Without walls, a room dissolves into a region, but having corners, a region turns into a room, and so on, the paradox continues. In addition, the four corners are, of course, also a synecdoche for “room” (Raum), and we begin to wonder whether one is simply a synonym of the other. Though not quite the same: what makes them appear synonymous are the strange, “false” adjectives that are switched to each identify the other. “Wallless” would have to describe a region, while “corners,” per analogy,

the room. To switch the adjectives, then, rather than remaining two different spatial constellations (an open region and an enclosed room), imagines into being two impossible synonyms, each defined by the unhomely combination of openness and enclosure. Together, the title and first stanza combine four markers of space—four corners, missing walls, the region, and the room—which are, like a Moebius strip, infinitely entangled opposites.

What happens to our notion of containment as commentary on the relation between form and content when the container constantly dismantles itself and its ability to contain? Or, asked in a different way, what does a relation between form and content look like when there is form without content and content without form? One way to answer these questions is to question the duality of form and content, to say that a strict distinction between the two falls short of recognizing that both are medium and message, that both always already communicate themselves and each other. A teacup, for example, is still a teacup even without tea in it. If I decided to never drink tea out of it but instead use it to drink wine, it's still a teacup. Years ago Stanley Fish pointed out that a few words and short lines written underneath each other prompts scholars, *by their very form*, to read them as a poem. In both cases the form and content both carry meaning, and instruction to recognize such meaning. In the first case, my choice will likely have entirely depended on the teacup always being a teacup and not a wine glass; in the second, the poem as form has taught us how to read something that may not be a poem. In short: no content without form. But also: no form without content.

And so to Meister. In “Ihr haltsamen,” the pivotal sense of containment emerges from the first stanza’s “Ihr haltsamen/vier ihr.” The line’s adjective “haltsam” is unusual and archaic. It requires interpretative work. Because “haltsam” isn’t used in modern German, part of the work can be accomplished by tracing its etymological roots. Few records list any use of the word before it disappeared from the dictionaries altogether, but the archaic meanings to be found primarily entail

the temporal aspect of containment or storage.⁶⁹ Something considered “haltsam,” according to this notion, indicates its permanence, viability, and durability over a long period, and describes its state or being foremost in relation to time. A bronze statue of a Peter the Great, for example, would be more “haltsam” than, say, a cardboard cutout, a house made of stone more than of straws and sticks, a book more than stack of loosely bound papers. The sense of containment emerges from the adjective’s meaning of withstanding or lasting though deteriorating outside influences: a wolf, weather, time. Today, the word “haltsam,” which even when in circulation was infrequently used, translates to words more directly associated with these temporal aspects when we speak of lastingness.

Reading and deciphering an archaic word is rarely an exercise in translation alone, but one of association and recognition of its remainders in the present. Part of the excitement of any etymological endeavor is that language also operates on a level of metaphorical meanings. Deriving from the verb “halten” (to hold), many of its related words emerged as metaphors of its basic sense *to hold* or *to persist*, just as in English, “uphold” or “behold” rely on metaphorical meanings of “hold” for what they mean.⁷⁰ When “haltsam” establishes a relationship between the verb “halten” and the noun “Ecken der Gegend” (corners of region), the word seems strange to a modern reader and speaker of German, who can recognize the verb, but to whom the adjective appears unfamiliar. It poses a riddle of sorts, which it appears can be solved by breaking the word into its smaller, familiar, and literal units before we can make sense of the—now—idiosyncratic combination. Rather than finding exact meaning in “haltsam,” then, we can only approximate how the familiar verb turns into this vague and peculiar descriptive adjective.

⁶⁹ See Meister, *Gedichte. Kommentar*. The only entry can be found in Grimm’s dictionary, which translates “haltsam” as “dauerhaft” (durable, permanent). In a German-English dictionary from the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century, based on Nathan Bailey’s *Etymological English Dictionary*, “haltsam” is listed among “dauerhaft,” “beständig,” “standhaft,” “stark” etc. as translation for “stable.” See Bailey and Fahrenkrüger, *Nathan Bailey’s Dictionary, English-German and German-English: Englisch-Deutsches Und Deutsch-Englisches Wörterbuch Erster Theil*, 816.

⁷⁰ A few common words today include “haltsam”: “unaufhaltsam” (persistent or inexorably), “unterhaltsam” (entertaining) or “enthaltam” (an antonym meaning both to contain and to abstain).

In taking this step, we get closer to imagining “haltsam” as form of containment. A glance at the English translation (“sustaining”) at this point helps us understand a grammatical capacity: whether we use a participle (like the English “sustaining,” or, as it would be in German, “haltend”) or an adjective when we describe a relation between a verb and a noun, is a choice of distributing emphasis. Whereas a participle, closer to its function as a verb, emphasizes what a thing, an object, a person, etc. does, an adjective shares information about its nature. Via its verb “halten” and its suffix “-sam,” the adjective refers a particular trait or characteristic of the noun it belongs to.

This is even more peculiar as it emerges from the first stanza’s apostrophe, where the poetic speaker doesn’t describe what he or she immediately sees (that the corners are sustaining something), but makes a verdict about a wider, even general, capacity of the four corners to hold and sustain. The corners can structurally sustain or “hold” a space, as walls would hold together a room. That the speaker’s exclamation is not a spontaneous description of the corners, but a plea to their capacity to hold and sustain, puts the expectation of spaces as structures of containment at the center of how they are perceived by the speaker, and by us.

Not only, then, do room and region structurally delineate space; they also provide the means of lasting over time, of enduring or living or going on or whatever it is that we think spaces do when it comes to time in the first place. This is not entirely surprising. Many of our words for organizing or describing time and space overlap in one way or another. Time and space are never completely distinct categories.⁷¹ That is part of what’s difficult about memory. If time is also about space, and space about time, their overlap confronts us with a conundrum, since we tend to assume that when one thing that is true about time turns out *not* to be true about space, memory is in trouble, that the category somehow can’t hold. (This can happen to any duality, since all concepts are metaphors, but

⁷¹ Think about, for example, prepositions like “between,” “in,” “on,” “in the middle of” (or, in German, “zwischen,” “in,” “im”), that can all refer to either spatial location or points in time. Or the single continuum of space-time, or distance and timing in quantum entanglement.

it's especially interesting here, since space and time are, after all, not just any old concepts.) In Meister, “haltsam” serves at least partly to resolve that problem—not to establish once and for all the correct relationship between space and containment, space and time—but rather to restructure a binary opposition as a paradox, such that duality is neither suspended nor enforced, but made infinite and (temporarily) unsolvable.⁷²

This procedure orients us in a preliminary way toward one of the general principles of Meister's collection of poems. Storage is normally, one supposes, about both space and time. For something to be stored and contained some kind of defined space is needed in order to protect it. This is the primary sense of storage. But spatial construction also requires, in ordinary experience, time; to be stored is to last, to endure over time in some relatively non-changing way; the space must last over time and protect while enduring. What characterizes these moments in Meister is the dissolution of coherent, stable space—the wall-less rooms, the four-cornered region—that appears simultaneously alongside words or phrases that assert, or even insist on, the possibility of endurance, of a lasting (“haltsam”) that by virtue of its lasting reconstructs the possibility of undefined space as somehow coherent, more than just a void or an absence. In this way for Meister existence is not the opposite of absence, not the obverse of the void; existence is not the thing that would counter emptiness. Space, rather, becomes a kind of projected figure of control, a figure that humans (or at least humans operating within the European linguistic, philosophical, and cultural traditions) aim to control because they know they cannot control time. But what they don't know is that space, too, cannot be controlled. To let go of the fantasy that we can control space—to let go of the idea of the room that holds things together, that stores in a conventional way—is in fact to confront the

⁷² Why is this useful? Because, as Niklas Luhmann has noted, paradoxes can usually be resolved by moving the analysis to another level; the function of a paradox, then, is both to illuminate a contradiction as a contradiction, but also to prepare the contradiction for its resolution on another plane of analysis. See Luhmann, *Einführung in die Systemtheorie*.

possibility of time, to abandon oneself to the *halsam* and thus to open up a new or even radical relationship to memory, to endurance, to storage.

These are big claims; but important ones. To see if they can be justified, both for a reading of Meister and for an argument about poetry and memory, I turn to another poem in the collection.

Immer noch
laß ich mich glauben,
es gebe
ein Recht des Gewölbes,
die krumme Wahrheit
des Raums.⁷³

In this stanza we encounter, again, two spaces composed with genitives that mark the spatial nouns' possessives or attributes: "Recht des Gewölbes" ("law of the vault") and "krumme Wahrheit des Raums" ("crooked truth of space").⁷⁴ The grammatical repetition of the possessive creates a structural correspondence of two slightly different images, each about spaces, and each offering also within itself pairs of similar concepts. This gives us two possibilities. First, poetically, repeating the grammatical structure but not the words it contains can always point to more than a same-but-different or intensified version of what initially is repeated (hence the potential of allegory). "Die krumme Wahrheit des Raums" appears as a different version of "ein Recht des Gewölbes," or as a more general version (about truth and space) inferred from the particular forms presented in the first phrase (about a law and a vault). Second, the repetition sets up a potentially allegorical relation between the law and the truth as a set of expressions on the one side, and the vault and the room on the other. We would then speak of a synonymy, as though there were two views of the same thing from different angles, two regimes of a dialectic, or two photos of the same person taken decades apart. And yet, the two images are also folded into each other: the adjective "krumme" describing the truth at the same time applies to "Gewölbe" at the other side of the repetition, a spatial structure

⁷³ Meister, *Gedichte: 1969-1979. Textkritische und kommentierte Ausgabe*, 3:272. "To this day/I let/myself believe/there may be/a law to the curved vault,/the crooked truth/of space." Meister, *Wallless Space*, 13.

⁷⁴ Here, Meister refers to the theory of relativity and Einstein's suggestion that space-time is curved.

that is curved, bent, or arched. In this third way, the repetition's initial two sides both evolve around the axis of "krumme" and "Gewölbe," and around a concept of space as inflected, crooked, and vaulted.

In the earlier poem Meister used the possessive to combine two oppositional yet still spatial concepts to create a paradoxical relationship. Here, the two nouns attributed to space are of a different kind; they belong to the realm of human ethics. "Recht" (law, or also right) and "Wahrheit" (truth) are the work of human thought, of philosophy, politics, epistemology, and social life. The poem's images do not, or not only, therefore imagine geometrical or structural space, but explain, or begin to explain, a human engagement in and with them.

In that engagement neither "Recht" nor "Wahrheit" stands on its own as an ethical or human category. "Recht" and "Wahrheit" are values that emerge from the "Gewölbe" (vault) and the "Raum" (room) as common sense belief that these spaces exist. This addresses a larger hermeneutical problem: the poetic self's perception of "Raum" and "Gewölbe" can only happen as experience via the perception and experience of others as formulated in a universal law and truth. If there's a law and truth to vault and room, it means they can be grasped as spaces, and recognized as reality following a set of rules or parameters that is true for all. Such a claim to universality creates for the poetic self an "outside" world and a human experience of space, each of which together amounts to a (troubling, as we will see) common sense of what these spaces ought to be. "Recht" and "Wahrheit," then, become categories that—because they are prolonged and long-existing rules—stabilize and manifest "Gewölbe" and "Raum" within human time, and articulate the possibility of time in general. The law and the truth provide us with affirmation of these spaces, as they become guiding principles that assure a certain non-change over time. They produce, in doing so, a form of lasting.

Like the speaker, we must be skeptical of these principles. “Immer noch/laß ich mich glauben/es gebe” (To this day/I let myself believe/there may be), a pronouncement of helplessness confronted with the realization that things may not be what they seem, begins the poem with a moment of crisis. In that moment, there is no resolution or confirmation of the sentence’s implied “but there are not” following the hypothetical “there may be,” and no decision (as the etymological root of “crisis” would require) as to whether or not to continue letting oneself believe what has been made or can be made. The suspended decision prolongs the time of reflecting on the common beliefs of the next lines; it also confirms them. “I let myself believe” acknowledges that the “I” still believes and conforms to a law and truth that are deemed real, even when behind the belief there may be knowledge (or suspicion) of the contrary. This is not a call for revolution or a sudden eureka. Rather, the crisis states the lasting and unresolved tension between the experience of one person and the experience underlying law and truth, which has accumulated over time and throughout that time’s historical, scientific, and philosophical participation in the law and truth’s knowledge, in its lapidary institutionalization of the social. The skeptical reminder of that tension is, the stanza tells us, forever *wahr* and *bewahrt*, true and contained, in *Wahrheit*, both *truth* and the *capacity to contain*; *Wahrheit* that sustains, in time, the troubling perceptions of space.

Like *halsam* in the earlier poem, then, *Wahrheit* abandons itself to a form of lasting, using space as a figure of control. We can begin to generalize this process as a feature or concern of Meister’s work by seeing it elsewhere as well, as in the final lines of “Immer noch”:

“Unendlichkeit,/himmlisch,/sie biegt das Eisen,/den Willen, sterblich/ein Gott zu sein”
 (infinity,/empyrean,/it bends the iron,/the will to be/a god, mortally). The philosophical-theological reflection of “sterblich ein Gott sein” indicates the (monotheistic, mythic) impossible simultaneity of the mortal and the divine, of being human and ascending over human nature. It measures two forms of being against each other, while excluding them from one another at the same time. The desire to

be both is denied in either direction. This existential paradox, like Meister's earlier paradoxes, demands no resolution within itself. It suggests, again, a contradiction (to die, to be immortal) that can only be resolved in the dialectical *Aufhebung* of lasting. The earlier "haltsam" and "Wahrheit"'s calls to lastingness require both finitude and infinity, both the limits drawn by time and space and their transcendence. These phrases and lines—*wandloser Raum*, *Ecken der Gegend*, *haltsam*, *Wahrheit*, *sterblich ein Gott zu sein*—all propose within their paradoxes and ambiguities a theory of storage and containment that evolves from the tension in the way "lasting" organizes—and disorganizes—ordinary concepts of time and space.

Sentence and Dialogue

Somewhere between paradox or catachresis as a figure and the idea of the *haltsam*, I want to argue, lies a larger theory and practice of storage (and hence information) in Meister. To understand why that is and how it works, however, one needs to recognize that this first collection of concepts is mediated, in Meister's work, by two other conceptual collections, ones that organize what one might think of as a "total" picture of the relation between Meister's poetics and information. The first of these involves Meister's sentences; the second, his dialogues, as we shall see.

On sentences: the first collection of Meister's late trilogy, *Sage vom Ganzen den Satz* (1972) (*Of Entirety Say the Sentence*), foreshadows many of the temporal and spatial images later so momentous in *Im Zeitspalt* and *Wandloser Raum*. In this earlier collection, "Raum" und "Zeit" only begin to appear as tropes, as markers that point us to something larger. The poems in *Sage vom Ganzen* are about that pointing-to, about relations created by forms of containment, relations between "sentence" and "entirety" that emerge from the poems as the main theme of the collection. Each poem gives us a small piece of the thread and a variation of what such a relation looks like, and pushes further the possible answers to how we can describe and grasp what such "wholes" and "sentences" might be.

A look at the earlier “haltsam” has given us an idea of how Meister’s language points us to poetry’s capacities to store and contain in terms of temporal and spatial dichotomies. Here, the collection’s thematic and poetic focus on what makes these capacities visible is formulated in the relation between the small and the large, between a fragment captured in the sentence and the sentence as fragment enclosed in a whole.

Sentences are containers. They produce, as a result, interesting formal and interpretative problems for the poem. Emerging from the Meister’s play with the multiple meanings, the word “Satz” can refer to a syntactical unit, a theorem, a philosophical or scientific thesis, a movement in musical composition, or a type setting. This is the moment of disambiguation that a dictionary, and encyclopedia, or an explanation makes its task. In any single instance, unspoken disambiguation can be that task of sentence-making, since the single meaning emerges, ideally, from the context of the sentence the word is in: I didn’t know if Satz meant sentence or theorem, but then I kept reading and I figured out the author was talking about theorems, and so on. When nothing further is said, however, when, on the contrary, opposing or different meanings seemingly merge, come together, or contradict in form and verse, the poem begins to tremble at the boundary of its capacity to include. And thus to be a poem.

“Sage vom Ganzen den Satz,” the task to say the sentence, is a peculiar demand. As a syntactic unit confined to a rather strict order of words, a sentence arranges and organizes a statement that exists, finished, in and of itself. The priority of its grammatical organization is to be self-contained, completed, and enclosing. “Satz” is a whole in relation to its smaller units (letter, syllable, word, phrase), but in relation to a paragraph, a text, a chapter, or a book the sentence is the smaller verbal unit. There is, in other words, no ontology of the sentence that doesn’t depend on its position within a system. Similarly, the important distinction in the title’s demand is that the sentence can never be *about* the whole, but is always *of*, that is part of the system of, “ein Ganzes.”

Whereas, for example, Meister’s aphoristic writings—exercising this distinction—are *about* some grander truth or principle, the collection’s poems never promise us a faithful illusion to know what “ein Ganzes” is. Rather, they hold up the continuous tension between the word, the sentence, and the poem as fragmentary, and as being held together by their belonging to something grander. The title, like an instruction for the poem, reads the poem’s metalinguistic awareness of being both a sentence of entirety (its artifact) and a capacity of the relationship between entirety and the smaller units through which it reveals itself.

In this relationship, the title’s possessive “vom Ganzen” insists on the perpetual belonging of the said and spoken sentence to a whole. We may not solve the problem of what the “whole” or the “sentence” is, but let’s pause for a brief moment to think about this insistence and the general assumptions a whole-part relationship sets up. To think a “whole” as divisible into parts is—philosophically, linguistically, mathematically—a particular a mode of thinking, one in which any forms of smaller unit are subsumed under some larger category, principle, or thing. What is difficult about this is that it gives us two possibilities: 1) either the sum of a number of smaller parts creates a whole, or 2) the parts exist *because* of a whole they belong to. What this second possibility gains over the first is the possibility that a relationship between parts and a whole isn’t necessarily the result of dividing a whole into its parts.⁷⁵ A random collection of words, for example, doesn’t necessarily produce a sentence; it is the syntactic and semantic structure of the sentence that make certain words work—and other words not—as sentence parts. Words are *components* of the sentence, as Janich would say, designed to fulfill a particular *human-decided function*.⁷⁶ This would, then, position “Sage vom Ganzen den Satz” as a statement meaning not a random collection of sentences that create a whole, but that the whole (even if we don’t understand exactly how) determines (or selects, produces, conditions) its sentences as its parts.

⁷⁵ See Janich, *Was ist Information?*, 56.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

And so the sentence: enclosure without disclosure. While the first possibility would allow for inferring the whole from its parts (like pieces of a puzzle or fragments of a mosaic letting you imagine the image they're part of), the second's fragmentary parts may exist as part of a whole ("vom Ganzen") that is beyond our comprehension or is even an illusory whole.⁷⁷ Containment, the second possibility tells us, exists and determines how we think of the world-structure surrounding us even if it doesn't reveal exactly all of its parts. Hence we find ourselves in the presence of a secret, a dark abyss, a law we don't quite grasp, or knowledge without knowledge—all reoccurring images in Meister's collection.⁷⁸ Meister's sentences, then—or, minimally, Meister's references to the sentence—seem to open up rather precisely onto the possibilities of storage and of containment that the poem practices under the social and epistemic conditions of language and thought.

Amidst the clamor of language, the sentence appears as one such practice, as in the poem that begins "Von allen Menschenwesen der Verbleib" ("The whereabouts of all human creatures"):

Du hast bald deinen Tag dahingebracht
und läßt erst recht
das Zeitgeschwätz beiseit,
setzt aus Geduld die Zeile.⁷⁹

Of this enigmatic stanza, "Zeitgeschwätz" is the most obscure word. The neologism—a kind of noun compound readers of Celan will recognize—combines two familiar nouns, "Zeit" (time) and "Geschwätz" (chatter), to create an odd genitive: the chatter of time. While the more common genitive ("of") would let us resolve the strange combination as metaphor, the noun compound promises no compromise. Attributing "Geschwätz" to "Zeit" introduces an unlikely description of a form of speech encompassing the limits between the sonic and the linguistic at the same time as it

⁷⁷ See Frederick and Foust, "Introduction," xi–xii.

⁷⁸ See "Mühsam/im gestimmten Raum/die Zeit in den Körpern,/leidiges Geheimnis, langsam." (in "Sage vom Ganzen"), "Nicht vom/Planeten, dem Vater,/nicht von dessen/Vater, dem Raum,/der Abgrund" (in "Nicht vom"), "Er ist Gesetz, ein/Wissen ohne Wissen" (in "Von allen Menschenwesen der Verbleib")

⁷⁹ Meister, *Gedichte: 1969-1979. Textkritische und kommentierte Ausgabe*, 3:173. "You've just about/lived out your day/and only now let /the chatter of time aside,/set, with/patience, the line of verse." Meister, *Of Entirety Say the Sentence*, 141.

obscures it. For “Geschwätz” is both chaotic, meaningless, and noisy, and yet grammatically coherent. “Geschwätz,” that is, differentiates itself from a message, talk, story, or monologue on one hand (its babbling and chatter don’t convey meaning beyond its words), and from merely being noise or sound on the other (it is still always bound to words and syntax, but strips them of conversational intent). Chatter’s logorrheic meaningfulness emerges from maintaining grammatical and syntactical organization at the same time as it obscures or dilutes the meaningful interaction. We may listen to “Geschwätz,” but we recognize it as unserious, superfluous, useless, or even untrustworthy. Unlike the patiently set line of the last line of the stanza, “Geschwätz” as a form of saying is highly troublesome: it is saying without saying.

Committed to this relative opposition, the passing of time is described in two ways: “dahinbringen” (live out, or wasting) and “Geduld” (patience). Regardless of whether one spends time squandering or in patience, both ways amount to the same measurement for time, the “Tag” (day).⁸⁰ Yet of course we know that they are not the same, or do not feel the same, and that their difference has to do with our relation to time rather than the passing of time itself. There is a certain discipline, meticulousness, and structure to “Geduld” that “dahinbringen” lacks. In the same way, “Geschwätz” lacks the clarity and structure of a “Zeile” (line). This analogy between antithetical modes of speaking and perceptions of time makes visible the ranges and scales on which they operate as time, as saying. That “saying” and “time” can be organized by these differences, and that they produce orders, kinds, and degrees becomes clear with the last two lines’ verb “setzen” and returns to the collection’s directive title: the “Satz” (sentence) as that which can be formulated and said of entirety.

What these lines offer, then, is an instance of Meister’s sentence in practice. The habits of enclosure/disclosure governing his writing (and foregrounded in the title of this collection) orient us

⁸⁰ Or, the span of life.

towards the sentence as organization of a part contained within a whole. Here, both the *structure* of the sentence and its *content* repeat that structure (of the traction created by relativity) via the verb “setzen.” In the line „das Zeitgeschwätz beiseit,/setzt aus Geduld die Zeile,” the opposition between “Geschwätz” as chatter and the “setting” of the verse, evolves not only from the part-whole structure encompassing “Satz” as sentence, but also from the setting of verse as the opposite of time, as a “saying” distinct from the “saying” of random order of words. Even under the threat of running out of time (“Du hast bald deinen Tag dahingebracht”), the urgency for patience cannot subside. As something outside of life in human time (he has set his life aside), the “setzen” of the line of verse, the poem’s imperative to the poet, becomes the lasting, most “haltsam,” form of “Sage.”

I promised earlier that I would discuss Meister’s dialogism. Here the first clue comes again from the collection’s title, whose other major word, “Sage,” is no less ambiguous than “Satz.” “Sage” can be a myth or legend, or the imperative form of “to say”⁸¹; here it is the verb that connects the sentence with the whole. As with “Satz,” the meaning of *Sage* finds itself modified by features of Meister’s poetic practice, namely his interest in exchanges that through speech depict a kind of dialectic between parts.⁸² These practices unfurl his Heideggerian notion of dialogue as the place (“Ort”) and event (“Ereignis”), where we encounter the difference between our “saying” and language’s “speaking,” where language is not merely a tool of “saying” but always also “speaks” and bears meanings beyond individual control and understanding. Meister’s dialogues test the limits of the sentence’s or the part’s work of disclosing the “whole” to which it belongs. The collection’s title formulates a dictum of this principle: the belonging of the sentence to entirety, the visibility of the fragments that lets us ask what whole they might belong to, *Sage vom Ganzen den Satz* tells us, happens in the verbal space of “saying” (sagen), a “saying” that at the same time as it creates the

⁸¹ See Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe. Unterwegs zur Sprache*.

⁸² Here, both notions of the Greek *logos* (λόγος)—speech and ratio—unfold with “Sage.”

possibility of disclosure is sentenced to remain a fracture of an “entirety” that it speaks but does not seem to know.

These ideas appear in practice in the poem that begins “Noch zu,” which starts by setting up an interrogative counterpart to the poetic self:

Noch zu
erzählen, noch zu
erzählen . . . mein
Gedächtnis
fragt mich, und ich
starre es an.⁸³

Providing all traits of a dialogue’s rhetorical characteristics, the first stanza’s “Noch zu/erzählen, noch zu/erzählen . . . mein/Gedächtnis/fragt mich” creates a distinction between the “ich” and its “Gedächtnis” (memory). The dialogic encounter unfolds two speakers, a question and a response, the introduction of oppositional voices, and the knowledge that something is happening between the two speakers because of or through their interaction with each other.

Whatever the dialogue is “about,” it’s not much: the “ich” is asked a question by its memory, but it cannot answer it and, instead, silently stares back, so that the dialogue comes to a halt with the poetic self’s mute response “und ich/starre es an” (“and I/stare at it”).⁸⁴ On the content side, of course, the poem illustrates an experience of memory. The third line’s ellipsis, for example, signifies the loss or fragmentariness of memory through the omission of words from the dialogue that are either not revealed by memory or not heard by the reader, or the poetic self. These words can never be heard by someone other than the “I” whose memory the poem engages as its own, for the

⁸³ Meister, *Gedichte: 1969-1979. Textkritische und kommentierte Ausgabe*, 3:93. “Still to/tell, still to/tell . . . my/memory/asks me, and I /stare at it.” Meister, *Of Entirety Say the Sentence*, 3.

⁸⁴ Rhetorically, dialogue produces a difference between two speakers, and allows for a variation of distinctions along such difference (such as “inner” and “outer” for example) in order to draw out systems within which certain phenomena and experiences operate. In a dramatic dialogue, for example, the outwards orientation serves the constellation of different characters, or in Platonic dialogues the argument.

⁸⁴ The inner-outer organization of space or self, the outlining of a set of characters, or the philosophical argument all pivot as kind of systems on the dialogue’s capacity to create various kinds and degrees of differences, thereby opening a space in which the dialogue produces an effect or result (intended or not) largely determined by the relation established between its As and Bs (and Cs and Ds).

intimacy between oneself and one's memory is something that can only, like one's pain, be spoken about to others, and not experienced by them. This is formalized in the indirect retelling of the dialogue, in which we experience the poetic self's experience with memory. We do not get, indeed we never get, the memory itself.

All this reappears at the formal level if one considers that—visibly, syntactically—Meister's dialogue is also an encounter with memory, not just because it mentions memory (*Gedächtnis*) but because it elaborates memory as form. Amidst all of Meister's containers, vessels, and rooms, memories appears—maybe a bit surprisingly—not a spatial metaphor, but as personified figure emerging from the dialogue.⁸⁵ Structured around the *Gedächtnis*'s question and the *ich*'s response, the stanza's dialogue produces an image of memory as figure capable of human speech (even, or even more, when it speaks cryptically—in riddles). The speechless staring of the “ich,” a paralysis and parody of the self's verbal capacities, becomes a twofold response when the memory of the encounter overcomes its initial muteness. This indirect retelling of the conversation confronts the reader with two of memory's uncertainties: one, the ellipsis after “noch zu erzählen” leaves open whether some parts of the conversation are missing or unsaid (either forgotten by the “ich” or omitted), and two, the “Gedächtnis” provides a dialogic partner that is neither the poetic self, nor a fully distinguished other; the “ich” imagines it as a personified faculty of the self. The dialogue thus introduces a language that can anticipate memory's functions: within the inner-outer distinction it sets up between memory and the “ich,” between the dialogue and its retelling, and between what the dialogue is about, and what it performs.

It is this inner-outer distinction, in which the memory-function enters into dialogue with the self, that will allow us to connect Meister's conversation to the structure of his sentence. There, too, we saw a pattern of enclosure that, rather than concealing what it contains, reveals the parts of an

⁸⁵ Not historically surprising: familiar allegorical personifications of memory for as long as something like memory exist—Mnemosyne, muse, mythical figures, etc.

undisclosed whole. In both the sentence and the dialogue, containment, abandoning or at least moving beyond its usual task of *containing*, also expands (in language, time, space, the poem) toward an outside. You can't say that the dialogue in "Noch zu" "contains" a conversation. The dialogue may contain its parts, but what a dialogue is about (outside of itself), what it says, emerges from its irreducible exchange and contrast. While its "aboutness" can be paraphrased, the dialogue (or even its representation) does not "hold" what it produces; it can only reveal the parts. To change, reveal, and create the conditions of the containers that do the work of "storing," to make visible some small part of an entirety: that is what grounds the arrangement of Meister's sentences and dialogues. These contrasting notions of containment and storage—as practice, as figure—are, if not an unsettling reversal of containment's stability or existential *Weltschmerz*, figures for the optimistic capacity of the poem to remember.

What, then, would it take to construct an overall poetics of this capacity of Meister's verse, not only as a poetics of memory but a poetics of memory as practice of information? To sentence and dialogue, conceived as here as structures practicing a kind of organization of a smaller inside against a larger outside, we would need to add the paradoxes of "containment" in Meister's rooms, vessels, and spaces, as well as the peculiar labor of his "haltsam." These two concepts—the paradoxes and "haltsam"—showed how the combination of common spatial words extend the limits of what containment can mean, as we saw in the ways that "haltsam," in its slight disturbance of habit, held its exact meaning just out of reach, or placed it on the tip of the tongue.⁸⁶ Likewise for the paradoxical spaces like "Ecken der Gegend," or "vom Ganzen der Satz." At this point, then, we have three reoccurring terms that organize containment in Meister's two collections: *halten*, *wahren*, and *setzen* (to hold, to keep, and to set), and with each of them a range of—closely and distantly—

⁸⁶ Compare this, for example, to a text like *Finnegans Wake*, where the amount of unfamiliarity and obfuscated or displaced signification is taken to the extreme. Joyce's language appears as constant and ongoing interruption of grammatical and syntactical organization of meaning, while never completely abandoning these structures, which, were it nonsense, it would do. We can find Meister's concern with exactness and meaning elsewhere, too: see "Ewigkeit" in *Wandloser Raum*. "DENK ES GENAU."

related words, as with *haltsam*, *Wahrheit*, and *Satz* (holding/lasting, truth, and sentence).⁸⁷ Together, these terms and their cousins elaborate containment through a consistent set of features: ambiguous words, grammatical paradoxes (usually involving space and time), and the establishment of relations of containment between fragments and entireties.⁸⁸ Together these amount to a matter of the *form*, and thus belong as much to the field of poetic *practice* as to the field of poetic *representation*.

It is not therefore a question here of organizing all these patterns and references into a thematic system, into a mosaic of memory images that would, after we've finally pieced it together, reveal a history of memory, or a history of poetry's relation to memory, or German poetry's particular relation to memory, or what memory had meant for Ernst Meister between 1972 and 1979. This is not, or mainly not, why (or how) we read poetry. Or why we should read Meister's poetry. Rather, observing a consistent Meisterian *practice* points us to an overarching engagement with memory, and, through that practice, illuminates (darkly) a theory of it.

I have talked about these practices mainly in terms of *containment*, less often in terms of *memory*. While some of Meister's poem, like "Noch zu," are explicitly about memory or comment on its process, this is not what I argue makes, or only makes, a practice of memory. My point here is not just that these features are thematic, but that they constitute experiments with poetry's capacity to practice active formal expressions of the ideas that they discuss; of the idea that poetry relies on practices of memory rather than on memory (or a memory) as its object. We've seen with Meister how containment and storage are such practices, and how they help us understand how memory's persistent "noch," its more and again and more again, brings together ways of storing of past and storing for the future. That is, they point us to how memory manages the difference between remembering and remembering. This is true even if the poetic self in "Noch zu" remains lost and amnesic; it is the poem that remembers, not the I in its dialogue.

⁸⁷ See also "enthalten," "Inhalt," "behalten," "gehalten," or "bewahren" in other poems in the collection.

⁸⁸ Or: small and large, part and whole, particular and general.

5. To Last, at Last

At this point, with a (more or less) coherent vision of what Meister practices, we can put that vision back into relation with the material from the earlier parts of the chapter. We had three cases: first, with Milman Parry and Albert Lord's theory of Homeric verse, one in which poetry as "measured speech" (ἔμμετρος λόγος) opened itself to mnemonic qualities in which other forms of speech and writing could only invest less fully. The multitude of stories and heroes of the *Iliad* was, Parry and Lord suggested, substantially easier to memorize and remember (and transmit) as metered verse organizing plot and description via form. In the second case, we saw that Mörike's poem "Auf eine Lampe" offered (via its ambiguous "achten") an example of poetic form as commentary on its subject (and in this case also the lamp, its object). Finally, we read Gibson's multimedial "Agrippa," which extended the problem of poetic memory to the poem, treating it as both medium and object of storage. Emphasizing the material threat of obliteration, forgetting, and death as part of the poem's ontology, "Agrippa" presented memory and storage in their relation to the poem's self-aware poiesis.

Each of these highlighted different aspects of memory as the work of the poem:

- 1) The poem stores information by taking on a form that makes it easier for humans to remember and communicate.
- 2) The poem stores a memory of/information about an object and at the same time comments on the process of remembering that object.
- 3) The poem is treated as medium of storage in a long line of storage media.

For our concepts of storage and memory, these aspects emphasize different priorities: some place that emphasis on content, some on structure or form. Thinking about Homer, we learned that form

can produce content, that the structure of the epithets could matter more than the meaning of the adjective. For Mörike's ode, on the other hand, the poem's ambiguity relied on the object's being a lamp (that is, something like its "content" or its referent), while for Gibson neither the form of the poem nor its content mattered much for the artwork's commentary on its process—beyond the not inconsequential (but also somewhat predictable) investment in memory and death.

But of course the lesser or invisible side of the form/content binary mattered nonetheless: each aligned the work of the poem with a human task of memory (to memorize, to remember, to preserve). What I mean is that they become tasks for both the poem and the human, in other words, that there is no poetry that is not *human* poetry, and no storage that is not—at least in social life—*human* storage, storage by someone for someone else. To describe these tasks (as poetic, as human) requires, necessarily, both the literal and figurative meanings of phenomena related to memory. Rather than being able to separate them so as to completely distinguish "storage" from "memory," or "lasting-in-time" from "lasting-in-space," then, separating as it were what a poem, image, or object preserves from what a human remembers, poetry confronts us with the mutual information of these terms—whether they are used to describe form or content, storage or memory, poetry or information.

This is what we learn, retroactively, from reading Meister. His work highlights a fourth item for our list, which now appears here in its (for now) final form:

- 1) The poem stores information by taking on a form that makes it easier for humans to remember and communicate.
- 2) The poem stores a memory of/information about an object and at the same time comments on the process of remembering that object.
- 3) The poem is treated as medium of storage in a long line of storage media.

- 4) The poem engages the tension of these different human tasks as part of its formal and poetic practice.

What this fourth aspect suggests is that poetry has long (and even traditionally) been concerned with practices of memory and information, that it has also long claimed these practices as poetic practices. Which means no understanding of memory, even less a contemporary understanding of memory in the age of information, would be complete without its poetic representations and practices (unless, of course, you are a computer, or believe that art happens merely in the imaginary). It is not that Meister's poems are more sophisticated or, for my argument, more *informational* in regard to how poetic form reflects, comments, and processes human tasks (though perhaps they are). Reading backward from them allows us to see what was also present in the others all along.

While the emphasis on poetry as a distinctly human practice at this point suggests, plausibly enough, that poetry is a product of creativity and craft and not a process of information, the dichotomous split between "poetic" and "informational" practices serves neither our understanding of poetry, nor of memory or information. What if, instead, we were to say that poetry has taught us what memory is? What if, indeed, poetry created information? The poems in this chapter as models for "storing" information make visible the possibility of poetry's engagement with memory, its involution of memory via form and content. They practice what would only much later would be described in informational terms. To say, then, that no argument about poetry as practice of information can be made without recognizing it as a human practice is to say that poetry and information cannot be thought as separate entities, or worse, as oppositional practices claiming different purposes.

Looking back at the Meister, finally, it becomes possible to observe that the three features of Meister's poetry that I described—storage, organization, and communication—correspond with what I described in the introduction as the “triangle” that governs much of the common understanding of the information-concept. It is possible, one might feel at this point, that this is a coincidence, or an informational bias applied to the reading of poetry. But the more exciting possibility is to consider that the “triangle” has something to do with how we've shared, read, and written poetry all along; that we would not think about information the way we do if it were not for poetry, as much as we have believed the “poetic” to be an opposition to “informational.” If what the information-concept as triangular process has changed about communication is that communication is not, or not always, a cause-and-effect process (“I understand B because you said A”), but that it describes an action within an array of complex systems or purposes (or, in Meister's terms, entreties), we ought to test poetry's informational practices against all parts of the triangle.

Part of what Meister seems to be thinking, then, is the exteriorization of the work of memory in the poem, the artifactual retention of a certain meaning-work, a retention in poetic form and language that remains retrievable by future readers. To say as much is to say that the poetic work of memory amounts to a kind of technical storage—which is of course exactly what Plato feared writing was all along. Poetry's unique purchase on the question of human memory vs. technical storage would thus revolve around its historical origins in oral culture, whose rhythmic and sonic elements were explicitly meant to manipulate the neurology of human memory, and the way those origins carry over into the practice of poetry in different information regimes—not only the regime of the beginning of writing, which was Plato's, or the regime of the wide availability of printing, which was Milton's, or the regime of computation, to which we now belong. Any complete theory of what poetry is and does, or what memory and storage are and do, would have to be considered within those contexts.

Resisting, however, the facile conflation of memory and storage (or of poetry and information), as Meister has done, does not require us to insist on their absolute differentiation. Nor should the occasional valorization of storage *over* memory, of technical practices over human ones, prompt us too simply to reverse that opposition. Memory and storage make, in any historical moment, a complicated pair; their connection always figures, and often calibrates, the relation between humans and their technologies—one of which is, of course, poetry. It is to that complexity, and the rich forms of analogy that cross it, that Meister's work points us, and which, in practice, his poems amplify and extend. "Ich *bin* das Gedächtnis der fernsten zeitlichen Fernen," he wrote, in 1948; "dieses Gedächtnis zu denken wird, nein, soll mir nie gelingen" (1989, 148). One need not accept the claim, or the characteristically Meisterian combination of semantic paradox and grammatical allure, to recognize in it the attempt to think the difficult place of memory in the work and being of the poem (if the "Ich" refers to a personified text) or in the activity of the human poet (if the "Ich" corresponds to a lyric speaker). In this way we see once again Meister as the great theorist of poetic memory for a period in which both the notion of poetry (as something somehow opposed to or outside of information, as Wittgenstein had it) and the idea of memory (as an analogue for storage, as Wiener and Weaver thought) were undergoing significant changes. Any attempt to think the totality of twentieth-century information culture, or the history of the idea of memory in it, is poorer if it does not include his work.

Chapter 2, Transmission : Mitteilung

I ended the previous chapter by suggesting that memory and storage are, rather than mere carriers of remembering and storing, crucial components of the “information triangle.” The rest of this dissertation expands that initial conceptualization of the triangle making up what we can think of as a humanist idea of information—an idea that is not so much concerned with asking “what is information?” as it is with foregrounding the human practices underlying its workings. Each of the three practices of storage, organization, and transmission might involve or emphasize singular aspects of information. Memory and storage, we saw with Meister, are mainly concerned with durability and lastingness of what is conserved, retained, or kept, whether someone spends years learning thousands of lines of verse by heart, a poem is stored on a floppy disk, or a poet engages the tasks of remembering and storing as part of a formal and poetic practice. But memory and storage are also, of course, about transmission and organization: remembering and storing require the selection and arrangement of what is committed to memory or retained for later use, and they require communication to prevent forgetting or losing what once was meant to last. The mutuality of the three practices—storing, transmitting, organizing—is why the triangular concept is useful. It allows for each of the practices to unfold on its own while recognizing that, in order to amount to an information-practice, they depend on and affect each other.

The previous chapter took as a pivot the complex analogy that binds, or might bind, one term of the triangle, storage, to a more warm-blooded version of the concept, namely memory. Here, I approach the second aspect of the triangle, transmission, from a specific point of departure: the idea of *Mitteilung* as an informational and poetic concern.

1. The Silent Messenger

The fall of the ancient city of Gabii some five hundred years BCE came as the result of betrayal. The Latin city, which lay about twenty kilometers east of Rome, refused to accept its annexation to the Roman Kingdom—a fate sealed by a treaty between the Kingdom and the Latin League—and the rule of Rome’s tyrannical king, Tarquinius Superbus. The occupied city, at war with the Roman forces, nonetheless chose to open its arms to Tarquinius’s son, Sextus, who arrived claiming to have fled his despotic father.

As the war reached a stalemate, the son sent a messenger to his father, asking how to proceed. The messenger found Tarquinius Superbus in his garden. Upon hearing his son’s message, the king fell silent. Pacing among his garden’s poppies, he slashed the heads of the tallest flowers with his stick, uttering not a single word. When the messenger returned to Gabii, he told Sextus of his father’s silent response. Sextus understood the message as a suggestion to eliminate the city’s leaders, which he did, executing some and sending others into exile. Gabii gave up its resistance and submitted to Roman rule.

The legend of Gabii’s fall to the rule of the tyrannical Tarquinian family (it was none other than Sextus Tarquinius who raped Lucretia), recounted most famously by Livy and Ovid, hinges upon the dramatic episode of the messenger delivering the message that would lead to the city’s usurpation.⁸⁹ The drama of this fateful missive lies in its silence. “To this messenger,” Livy writes, “I suppose because he seemed not quite to be trusted, no verbal reply was given.”⁹⁰ But Tarquinius’s “distrust” in the messenger presents a predicament that is itself figurative: even as Livy’s line passes judgment on the messenger’s reliability, it also speaks to the general problem of all communication.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Titius Livius, in his *Ab Urbe Condita* (*The Foundation of the City*) written between 29 and 9 BCE, offers one of the very few accounts of early Roman history. The legend also appears in Ovid’s *Fasti* and is briefly mentioned in Vico’s *New Science* and Lessing’s *Treatises on the Fable*. See Ovid, *Fasti*; Vico, *New Science*; Lessing, *Fabeln. Abhandlungen über die Fabel*.

⁹⁰ Livius, *Ab Urbe Condita*, Book I, 54.

⁹¹ On the figure of the messenger and the question of media, see Krämer, *Medium, Messenger, Transmission. An Approach to Media Philosophy*.

The exchange between the plotting father and son is marked by a diegetic distance—the message traveling from garden to Gabii—and an extra-diegetic one, the very transmission and mediation of the message upon which the story invites us to reflect. The messenger does not need to *understand* the gesture. His task is intermediary; it is to convey the message that cannot be said directly. In this way he has something of the function of what we have learned to call a “channel”: he is the technical medium for the passage of a signal whose formal uninterpretability (to him) assures that he will not, and cannot, alter its content.

The anecdote’s illustration of the process of communication may have been what Søren Kierkegaard had in mind when he chose, as the epigraph to *Fear and Trembling* (*Frygt og Bæven*, 1843), these lines of Johann Georg Hamann’s: “was Tarquinius Superbus in seinem Garten mit den Mohnköpfen sprach, verstand der Sohn, aber nicht der Bote” (“what Tarquinius Superbus said in the garden by means of the poppies, the son understood but the messenger did not”).⁹² Though it would be odd to think of *Fear and Trembling* as being primarily about processes of communication—its main subject is the difference between religious faith and public morality—nonetheless the choice of the epigraph suggests a variety of ways in which the central themes of Kierkegaard’s book might be reimagined in communicative terms. For the story with which the book opens, that of Abraham and Isaac, features two powerful forms of communicative silence. The first is Abraham’s, which God understands, but his wife and child do not. The second is God’s, the mystery of which readers, like Sextus, must interpret for themselves, and into whose darkness only the light of faith can shine its holy flame.⁹³

⁹² Hamann’s description is already an interpretation; he assumes that he, like the son, knows what the gesture means. On the role of Hamann and the epigraph to *Fear and Trembling*, see Carlisle, *Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling: A Reader’s Guide*; Lippitt, *The Routledge Guidebook to Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling*; Yamamoto, “Rhapsodic Dismemberment: Hamann and the Fable.”

⁹³ The modes of silence surrounding the Biblical epic are, as Erich Auerbach has noted, designed to “require subtle investigation and interpretation”; they practice the textual effort to “subject us,” to “overcome our reality” with their own. See Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 15.

It would take several years before Kierkegaard would turn his attention directly to the questions of communication that haunt the opening pages of *Fear and Trembling*. The tension between public and private messages, between what one might think of as “exterior” knowledge and “interior” intimacy, reappears explicitly in the *Unscientific Postscript* (*Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift*, 1846) as well a number of shorter, fragmentary lectures of that period. At the heart of Kierkegaard’s theorization of communication, which hinges on an opposition between “direct” and “indirect” exchange, lies the Danish word *meddelelse*, usually translated into English—as I have already done implicitly here—as “communication.” *Meddelelse*, in Kierkegaard’s work, describes an act of engagement. It is not simply message or medium; yet, we will see, it does not completely abandon these etymological, impersonal notions of how we communicate. In what follows I pursue Kierkegaard’s theory, and his use of *meddelelse*, along three paths: first, I seek to outline the dichotomous methods of communication governing Kierkegaard’s approach to truth in the *Postscript* and to subjectivity and knowledge in later writings; second, I contrast the functions of *meddelelse* with concepts of language and communication developed in Walter Benjamin’s early essay “On Language” (“Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen,” 1916).

Finally, I connect these arguments to contemporary theories of communication and information. The last two decades have seen the humanities attempting, in a startling variety of theoretical and practical ways, to come to terms with the information regime of the late twentieth and earlier twenty-first centuries, a regime defined by the double postwar development of engineering-based “information theory” (by Claude Shannon and others) and the growing global recognition of the rise of the “information society.” Emerging from the newly founded information field (and its cousins in linguistics and semiotics), these attempts have included structuralist theories

of the work of art,⁹⁴ social, cultural, and political theories of the informed citizen,⁹⁵ and “posthumanist” critiques of technology, media, and literature,⁹⁶ as well as the development of large-scale tools and theories that have brought quantitative and computational analysis into the humanities.⁹⁷ Peter Janich attributes the emergence of these information-centric approaches to humanist issues to “the mechanization of the spoken work in human communication” (“die Mechanisierung des gesprochenen Wortes in menschlicher Kommunikation”), made possible by the “naturalization” of information as calculable measurement. Information is, in the post-Shannon world, a blessing and a curse, an *ersatz* value with the concrete promise of making tangible the human practices that govern our engagement with the world, even as it becomes a representation of much of the anxiety, overwhelmedness, and oppression of technology-driven society in the so-called “Information Age.”⁹⁸

Into that age comes *meddelelse*, a word whose German etymon, *Mitteilung*, has been translated variously as message, communication, and information. My goal here is not to reconcile these various meanings, but to trace the term’s rich translational genealogy as a way to recalibrate the contemporary conceptual field of information. Such a recalibration begins with the recognition that in the ideas of the message, and in the idea of information, communication, media, and *meddelelse*/*Mitteilung*, a series of contested concepts legitimize each other to produce specific trends, discourses, and definitions—whether they concern, as they do for Kierkegaard, communication and human subjectivity, or, as they do for Benjamin, language and human expression.

⁹⁴ From the information aesthetics of Bense, Moles, or de Campos to the structuralist readings of Yuri Lotman, and literary critic William Paulson. See Bense, *Aesthetische Information Aesthetica II*; Bense, *Programmierung des Schönen*; Moles, *Information Theory and Esthetic Perception*. Translated by Joel E. Cohen.; Campos, *Novas*; Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text*; Paulson, *The Noise of Culture*.

⁹⁵ See Masuda, *The Information Society as Post-Industrial Society*; Virilio, *The Information Bomb*.

⁹⁶ See Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*; Liu, *The Laws of Cool*; Poster, *The Mode of Information: Poststructuralism and Social Context*; Poster, *The Information Subject*; Clarke and Rossini, *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman*; Ramsay, *Reading Machines*.

⁹⁷ See Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees*; Jockers, *Macroanalysis Digital Methods and Literary History*.

⁹⁸ Janich, *Was ist Information?*, 33.

2. Communication, Direct and Indirect

In 1846, Kierkegaard published the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, his foundational existentialist treatise on the subjectivity of truth. In this *Postscript*, Johannes Climacus—one of Kierkegaard’s authorial pseudonyms—sets out to attack the “logical systems” of post-Cartesian philosophy and Hegel in particular. Hegelian logic, Climacus argues, aims to think of human existence as an all-encompassing system that seeks to understand knowledge and truth as universal and absolute values. Within such a system, however, the deterministic belief in objective truth comes at the expense of the subjective individual’s experience. Throughout the *Postscript*, Climacus urges the reader to dismantle these systems and view human existence as essentially subjective, as a subjective process of decision-making and facing uncertainty:

Whereas objective thought invests everything in result, and helps all mankind to cheat by copying and rattling off result and answer by note, subjective thought invests everything in becoming and omits the result; partly because as an existing individual he is constantly coming to be, which holds true of every human being who has not let himself be fooled into becoming objective, into inhumanly becoming speculation.⁹⁹

Climacus sets up the dichotomous terms governing the understanding of human existence — objectivity and subjectivity—as an opposition: objective versus subjective thinking, results versus belonging, answers versus possessing, speculation versus becoming, the former asserted from the outside, and the latter coming from inside. This distinction marks the crucial difference between two kinds of thinking, one imposed by a (historical, scientific, philosophical) system that “invests everything in the results,” and one emerging from the individual (ethical, religious) experience in and with the world. Human beings, “constantly coming to be,” exist in uncertainty. Philosophical thought that detaches itself from subjective thinking, Climacus says, can only be a deception or a letting oneself to be deceived, since the conclusiveness of objectivity is contradictory to “becoming” as an always ongoing human process. The contradiction that arises from these two modes of

⁹⁹ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 62.

thinking is, then, that someone telling me that something is true is not the same as my own experience of truth. The Church, logical philosophy, or, the legal institution of marriage all fall in the first category of “copying and rattling result and answer by note,” for the Church tells people how to be a true Christian, logical philosophers and “systematicians” approximate what the absolute truth is, and the legality of marriage approximates certainty in love. But faith, truth, and being in love are also experiences “belonging to” and being “possessed by” one self. One may share the belief in god or know that everyone is familiar with what it is like to be in love while simultaneously knowing that one’s own faith and being in love is not the same as everyone else’s. Both modes shape the experience of our existence, to be one and to be one of many.

Climacus’s attention to subjective experience leads us to the core of what makes such experience possible. His purpose, even when it seems like he fervently argues against objectivity, is not to replace the logic of objectivity with existentialism’s inwardness (or, for that matter, philosophy and science with religion). Rather, he conceives of this duality of outward assertion and inward experience as shaping human existence in general. Both objective and subjective truth are methods of existing, not goals in themselves, since an absolutely objective thinker would cease to exist as an individual person, and a purely subjective thinker would isolate him- or herself from the world completely. The two sides form an unresolvable dialectic. How does one exist there? How can one manage this paradoxical opposition? To live, Climacus suggests, requires the awareness of the contradictory forces on a level that is not the dialectic itself. Awareness can only happen through reflection. The capacity to reflect on one’s dialectical position is the place where Climacus begins to formulate one of Kierkegaard’s pivotal existential concepts: the existential engagement with the world as dependent on communication.

To elaborate how communication grounds the ways we engage with either objective or subjective truth, Kierkegaard establishes two modes of communication parallel to his distinction.

The first, *direct communication*, belongs to objective thinking and describes the content of a message that does not require reflection on the receiver's part. Its truth is formulated by the one who utters it (as in a sermon or a lecture); it is announcement rather than experience. *Direct communication* and objective truth have no connection to subjective experience, no relation to how a listener receives and experiences their statements. It aims to seamlessly communicate established knowledge. The second mode, *indirect communication*, shifts the emphasis from the authority of truth to the subjective thinker's mode of being in the world. "The subjective thinker," Climacus writes, "has to be aware from the start that artistically the form must have as much reflection as he himself has when existing in his thinking."¹⁰⁰ He or she no longer just receives a message, but has to experience and appropriate what is being said, thus becoming an active part in the process of communication.¹⁰¹ This process is, in a dialectic constellation, fundamentally aligned with the existentialist idea of being.

From the alignment of being with communicating emerges, implicitly, a theory of language. Not long after Kierkegaard pseudonymously publishes the *Postscript*, he advances the difference between direct and indirect communication in his *Journals and Papers*.¹⁰² There, he further refines the earlier distinction between direct and indirect communication as *communication of knowledge* (*videns meddelelse*) and *communication of capability* (*kunnens meddelelse*). Kierkegaard strongly critiques the former; to him, *communication of knowledge* merely means the verbatim restatement of a message or the immutable transmission of "an object." What's worse, such communication emerges as a scientific negation of human interaction and decision-making:

The modern age has—and I regard this as its basic damage—abolished personality and made everything objective. Therefore men do not come to dwell upon the thought of what does it mean to communicate but hasten immediately to the *what*

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Many Kierkegaard scholars have emphasized his theory of indirect communication as central to his thought: see Lübcke, "Kierkegaard and Indirect Communication"; Adams, "Kierkegaard's Conception of Indirect Communication in 'The Dialectic of Ethical and Ethical Religious Communication' of 1847"; Domaradzki, "Kierkegaard's Theory of Communication."

¹⁰² See in particular *The Dialectic of Ethical and Ethical-Religious Communication* (1847) and *Second Lecture: The Communication of Knowledge and The Communication of Capability* (1847).

they wish to communicate. And since almost every such *what*, even at first glance, reveals itself to be something very prolix, there is in the passage of time even less of an opportunity or place for considering what it means to communicate. A philosopher, a dogmatician, a pastor, etc.—they all begin immediately with the *what* they wish to communicate, with studies and preliminary sketches of it. And since, to repeat, there is everywhere an enormous apparatus this practically overwhelms them, and in any case they soon get a tremendous amount to communicate. They are, to recall an expression from the previous hour, “happily saved from the pangs of delay.”¹⁰³

The shift from *how* communication works to a preoccupation with *what* is communicated, Kierkegaard writes in the *Second Lecture*, “abolishes” the human-decided effort of communication. What was once a Socratic virtue—the subjective, existential function of speech—is now abandoned in favor of an ever-growing communication of objects and knowledge. These two modes of communication diagnose a paradigmatic shift in a moment of modern angst: detached from individuality, the prevailing *communication of knowledge* produces an “overwhelming” confrontation with the “tremendous amount” of verbose discourse and knowledge imposed by an “enormous apparatus,” what we today might refer to as an information “overload.” Facing the new speed of life, the subjective existing thinker necessarily finds him- or herself struggling between the conflicting forces of quality versus quantity, form versus content, meaningful versus impersonal interaction. Not to become lost, but to be in charge of one’s decisions, not to hasten to preliminary answers, but to dwell on what it means to communicate: these are the challenges a *communication of capability* seeks to confront and overcome.

Resisting the “immediacy” of content-oriented communication, the method of *communication of capability* relies, Kierkegaard argues, on an element of “delay.” Delay and immediacy, here, present us with two different ways of managing time. Whereas the central concerns for the *communication of knowledge* involve instant results and immediate answers, the second mode operates through delays and diversions. Without these prolonged temporal and spatial dimensions, which characterize the

¹⁰³ Kierkegaard, “Second Lecture: The Communication of Knowledge and The Communication of Capability,” 304.

indirectness of *capability*, communication remains a unilateral and authoritative movement. Its purpose is to formulate and pronounce already formulated truths rather than to unfold slowly over time. This very unfolding characterizes a model of communication as an always-delayed and delaying human practice.

Kierkegaard offers, in more basic detail, a practical vocabulary for the processes of transmission and communication. “When I think of communicating,” he writes, “I think of four parts: (1) the *object*, (2) the *communicator*, (3) the *receiver*, (4) the *communication*.”¹⁰⁴ These four terms frame any act of human communication; they are, however, not linear and fixed. Depending on whether communication happens as *direct* or *indirect*, as communication of *knowledge* or of *capability*, these parts are given different emphases. Direct communication is quickly explained: in direct communication the emphasis lies solely on the object. Its mode is a closed system whose preoccupation with “what” is communicated has no serious regard for who speaks or who listens. Herein also lies Kierkegaard’s general critique of “logical systems”: both tend to construct the world objectively and absolutely, thereby leaving no possibility for subjective experience of reality within their “apparatuses” and systems. As a process of transmission it is completely impersonal. Indirect communication, on the other hand, describes a complex human function. Since its process of communication lacks a definitive object, indirect communication is Kierkegaard’s method to account for the complexity emerging from the different relations between “communicator,” “receiver,” and “the communication.” At its center, *capability* (or “oughtness”) aims to rescue subjectivity from the modern preference for facts and ready-made *knowledge*.

All this prepares us to understand the critical role played in Kierkegaard’s work by the concept of *meddelelse*, or *Mitteilung*. In English translations of his writings, the Danish *meddelelse* appears universally as *communication*. This choice of translation is slightly misleading. I aim, in what

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 306.

follows not, however, to correct the discrepancy between original and translation, but to point to subtle distinctions that shape our contemporary concepts of communication and transmission. Rather than helping us to find a consensus among these three terms—*Mitteilung*, transmission, and communication—Kierkegaard’s existential theory of communication reminds us how their conceptual differences influence our understanding of what it means to communicate. When Kierkegaard’s *meddelelse* finds its meaning in the English terms *communication*, some of its etymological bearing remains hidden in their original signification. A look at these particular translation practices offers an insight into historical concepts of the terms grounding human communication’s diverse processes. In my first example, Kierkegaard’s *meddelelse* describes two different kinds of communication, one impersonal and direct, the other a dialogic possibility of reflection. While we can think of both as “communication,” Kierkegaard’s original term *meddelelse*, and, as we will see later, Wittgenstein’s *Mitteilung*, foreground an aspect of transmission mainly lost with their English translations: the antilogical structure of what it means to *share*.

To see how the contradicting notions of *sharing* provide us with different concepts of what it means to communicate requires a bit of etymological work alongside Kierkegaard’s distinction between the two forms of *meddelelse*. In common usage *meddelelse* refers to a message, statement, or announcement that is sent (out) by someone to someone else. It means transmission in the most direct sense, similar to how we would use “notification,” “communiqué,” or “memorandum” to describe a source of information providing details about, for example, a state of affairs, a change in policy, or a reminder of some sort. *Meddelelse*, like the German *Mitteilung*, consists of the prefix “with” (med/mit) and the verb “to share” (dele/teilen). Its literal meaning—perhaps most closely reflected in the English verb “impart”—is to share a piece of information with someone who will be affected by it. Involving an authoritative announcement, the emphasis of *meddelelse* lies on *what* is communicated and, to a lesser degree, the sender or communicator of the message. That is, what the

message says depends entirely on who formulates it; it does not request a substantial response from whoever reads or hear it. It is a one-way action not designed to solicit a reaction that would in turn alter or change the original statement. Kierkegaard's definition of *communication of knowledge* (*videns meddelelse*) aligns with this first sense of *meddelelse*: the sharing of an object that is only about the object.¹⁰⁵ A *meddelelse* is, in other words, mainly not an exchange to begin a dialog, but an end in itself to merely convey information that is already established.

The first sense of sharing, then, is to present someone with knowledge, to begin with formulating something as knowledge and then to communicate it. Within such a process of sharing knowledge is conceived as an object that can be transmitted. The focus of "sharing" is primarily the object itself, and second, the object's communication between two ends, between a sender A and a receiver B. This kind of "shared knowledge," which Kierkegaard calls direct communication, defines *videns meddelelse* as a basic sequential transmission of a message. Once the message arrives at the receiver, the process of communication (*meddelelse*) ends and thereby renders the receiver as a mere passive listener. Sharing, here, defines *meddelelse* as a direct and undemanding process whereby the object (or the message carrying the object) stays intact and unchanged throughout the process of being shared. As a result, little interpretative work is required on the part of the receiver or reader. We can imagine this process somewhat analogous to other acts of transmission that govern modes of communication like, for example, the delivery of a letter, the sending of a messenger, or a signal in an electrical wire. In all of these processes *what* is transmitted, sent, or communicated is (or offers to be) a clearly defined object that moves unaltered in a single direction. To share a *meddelelse*/*Mitteilung* means to grant someone access to a predetermined knowledge or information established well before it was shared.

¹⁰⁵ "If it is the object which is reflected upon, then we have the communication of *knowledge* [*Videns*]" Ibid.

Throughout Kierkegaard's writings, *videns meddelelse*—the communication of knowledge as direct communication—serves two distinct purposes: first, to propel a critique of the prevailing philosophical discourse and its failure to acknowledge communication as a self-aware, existential act, and second, to set up a clear contrast to his subjective notion of communication. As much as *videns meddelelse* is the method of direct and objective sharing, “objectivity” is, despite its demand for impartiality, not conceived as ontological value free from epistemological and political constraint. Kierkegaard's critique is of the embeddedness of *videns meddelelse* in a hierarchical structure of knowledge governed by, for example, the Church or logical systems prescribing certain truths. To mistakenly accept knowledge communicated in this first way as scientific or logical truth, Kierkegaard writes, has little regard for how humans actually experience themselves and the world. It is an impersonal process that favors the system over the individual, the knowledge over the learner, the immediate over the deferred.

We can see why Kierkegaard sets up this first mode of sharing as detrimental to his existentialist project and as symptom of the modern and industrialized emphasis on increasing speed, efficiency, and mechanization of human tasks. When communication is direct (and one-directional) it requires little participatory engagement from the receiver. Direct communication can only be established within clearly organized structure of communication, in which subjective experience of the communicated object matters very little (or not at all). The notion of sharing in this first form of *meddelelse/Mitteilung*, then, describes what happens with the object or the content of a message. As a noun, *meddelelse* refers to the means by which knowledge is communicated—it is an object itself, an object that, like an envelope containing a letter or a vessel carrying water from the well, encloses and protects the content it transports. The direct communication of *videns meddelelse* depends on this very clear division of communicatory labor into concrete and manageable parts. Manageable, however, not by every part of the chain equally, and to a minimum by the individual

who receives the message. It is a sharing that privileges the “division” (“teilen”/“dele”) at the root of *meddelelse* in several ways: as a stable chain of parts that constitutes the directness of its communication, as a division between the content of a message and the message as container of that content, and as hegemonic separation between sender and receiver. These notions of communication privileged by direct communication and *videns meddelelse* sum up this first capacity of *meddelelse*/*Mitteilung*: sharing as purposeful transmission of information.

While this the direct communication of *videns meddelelse* comfortably aligns with the meaning of *meddelelse* I have discussed so far, Kierkegaard’s second mode of communication does not easily fit into the same categories. *Kunnens meddelelse* (the communication of capability) foregrounds the individual’s subjective experience when he or she engages in dialogue, a “dialectic exercise,” Climacus writes, rather than a mere reception of knowledge. In the latter, one’s response (if there can be any) is limited to either affirmation or negation. If someone tells me “the train will arrive at noon,” I can choose to believe it and be at the train station at that time, or I can believe that this information is wrong and therefore ignore it. In neither case does my response change anything about the knowledge of my (for all one knows) well-intended dialogic partner. What constitutes this kind of communication is that it is solely about the object of knowledge (the time of the train’s arrival), and not about my naiveté, skepticism, or perhaps the consequences of my missing the train. Any of these subjective experiences exceeding the object of knowledge are not part of *videns meddelelse* anymore, but are a matter of *kunnens meddelelse*. They are, Kierkegaard writes, constitutive of a second kind of communication that grounds the subjective experience of the world. What’s important here is that rather than separating “communication” from “experience” altogether, Kierkegaard fundamentally ties subjectivity to the ability to communicate and is, if we remember Climacus’s note on love, a dialectic experience only possible through some form of sharedness.

Kunnens meddelelse, then, offers us a second capacity that highlights a completely different mode of sharing. In *kunnens meddelelse* we encounter a meaning of *meddelelse*/*Mitteilung* that seems to conflict with its more common and customary understanding as one-directional transmission or imparting of a message grounding *videns meddelelse*. A second meaning emerging from the communication of capability shifts the purpose of *meddelelse* from the transmission of knowledge as object to the ability of those involved in communication. In English and also German Kierkegaard translations, this second meaning lingers in the background and is absorbed by the more ambivalent and open “communication”/“Kommunikation,” where it has remained largely passed over in recent scholarship. Alastair Hannay, in the preface to his 2009 translation of the *Postscript*, briefly acknowledges this translational dilemma:

In the much-discussed Kierkegaardian notion of ‘indirect communication’ the Danish for ‘communication’ is ‘Meddelelse.’ This notion is that of a one-way relation better rendered by ‘imparting.’ Kierkegaard does indeed use the Danish term ‘Communication’ in connection with his notion, but only when talking abstractly, and also otherwise where a two-way relation is clearly intended, as in the ability to impart things, such as mere information, to one another, and also sometimes in connection with the then recent development of telegraphic communication.¹⁰⁶

The difference between one-way and two-way relation grounds Kierkegaard’s distinction between direct and indirect communication, *videns* and *kunnens meddelelse*. It seems right, then, to recognize that “meddelelse” and “Communication” are not only slightly different concepts, but also partly contradictory. In English, we can distinguish between “imparting” information *to* someone and “communicating” information *between* one another, emphasizing that the former describes a “one-way relation” and the latter a more “abstract,” “two-way” exchange between two people. To emphasize this difference is useful to denote the separate functions of Kierkegaard’s two concepts of communication I have previously laid out. But while in translation such distinction is possible, Kierkegaard’s original term includes both—one-way and two-way imparting—in one single noun, a

¹⁰⁶ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, xxxix.

noun that constitutes the core of his concept of communication. It seems even more curious that elsewhere Kierkegaard makes a distinction between “meddelelse” and “communication,” as Hannay suggests. If we were to accept that the notion of “meddelelse” is merely that of a one-way relation, then Kierkegaard’s second mode—*kunnens meddelelse*—must trouble us. For Kierkegaard does not restrict his use of “meddelelse” only to the one-directional movement of transmission in forms of communication that he describes as such (as is true for *videns meddelelse*), but holds on to it to form his crucial concept of *videns meddelelse*, whose indirectness seems to defeat that notion. The problem, then, is that where the direct communication of *videns meddelelse* is involved, the effortless one-way motion of *meddelelse* leaves no doubt that the noun fits the speech act. When it comes to *kunnens meddelelse*, on the other hand, the noun seems to betray the oblique ways of communication it aims to describe.¹⁰⁷ For *kunnens meddelelse* opens the possibility of an irresolute and growing sharing, a wavering agreement between two people to engage with their own, and with each other’s world. A capability that, beyond this illusive betrayal, beyond the mechanics of transmission, harbors the common ground of social engagement.

3. Sharing is Caring

Revisiting Kierkegaard’s terms of communications offers us a way to discuss the social grounds of *meddelelse*/*Mitteilung* mainly lost with its prevalent one-directional meaning. His distinction between two kinds of *Mitteilung* tells us that *Mitteilung* can be both: stagnant and one-directional, but also diffuse and variable, opening up its possibility of partaking in a social process rather than merely a

¹⁰⁷ Lübecke, for example, who offers a reading of Kierkegaard’s theory of communication in terms of semantic and pragmatic difference. The difference between direct and indirect communication, he writes, is not a semantic problem but a pragmatic choice: “we might therefore say that the Kierkegaardian term ‘indirect communication’ applies to certain *speech acts* intending to produce a specific *perlocutionary effect*, namely the effect of listeners making a decision”; Lübecke, “Kierkegaard and Indirect Communication,” 33.

technical procedure. A message, Kierkegaard tells us, is not only a communicative instrument of “direction,” but is a component of human existence with much higher stakes.

For Kierkegaard, these stakes have everything to do with how we understand ourselves as human beings, with whether we find ourselves as passive recipients of knowledge or as emancipated and self-aware social beings. In his scattered writings and notes on communication, Kierkegaard never fully formulates what these stakes may be, or how exactly one would go about and speak “indirectly.” *Kunnens meddelelse*, the communication of ability, remains an unsettled proposition throughout the *Postscript* and Kierkegaard’s posthumously published *Journals* and *Papers*. Any reader of Kierkegaard will seek a definite formulation of *meddelelse* in vain. The many fragmentary mentions of his two concepts of communication never fully amount to the pathbreaking clarity a reader in search of herself may hope to discover. Kierkegaard, rather than explaining the workings of *meddelelse* and offering a clear directive, performs it in his writing. This is true for Kierkegaard’s work in general: questions of authorship arising from his use of pseudonyms, contradictions and repudiations of earlier statements, seemingly meaningless and cumbersome repetitions without offering a way out—they all pertain to the philosopher’s mode of thinking and writing. “For Kierkegaard,” Herrmann writes, “not only are ethical truths indirectly communicated on the page but also are reflected in the life of the one who proffers them. In other words, the ethical teacher must practice what he or she preaches.”¹⁰⁸ We need to add to our reading, therefore, the awareness of our own participation in this mode and of Kierkegaard’s consciousness of philosophical thinking as dialogue.¹⁰⁹ To see that the difference between *direct* and *indirect* communication is doubly reflected in the work in the practice of its performance, and to recognize, finally, that herein lies the full potential of *meddelelse*:

¹⁰⁸ Herrmann, “Kierkegaard and Dialogue,” 79.

¹⁰⁹ See other discussions of Kierkegaard’s philosophical method. Philipp Schwab, for example, writes that “Im Ganzen ist es allerdings für Kierkegaards Reflexion des Indirekten bezeichnend, dass die tiefste Bestimmungsebene des Indirekten kaum ausführlicher zur Entfaltung kommt. Gleichwohl sollte deutlich geworden sein, dass das Darstellungsproblem angesichts der inkommensurablen Singularität einen zentralen Punkt in Kierkegaards Philosophie betrifft; und zugleich liegt es auf der Hand, dass diese Darstellungsfigur notwendig ein *indirektes* Verfahren fordert.” See Schwab, *Der Rückstoß der Methode*.

that communication as an ethical, that is to say, as a self-aware human act, requires the human work of calibrating one's sense of self against that world around that shapes it.

In 1916, fifty years after the publication of the *Postscript*, Walter Benjamin evokes—and performs—a similarly ambivalent notion of *Mitteilung* to emphasize its significance as process of engagement.¹¹⁰ Like Kierkegaard, Benjamin is critical of treating *Mitteilung* merely as a communicative instrument or vehicle of transmission, thereby isolating it from its wider human circumstances. Kierkegaard divides *Mitteilung* into two functions, direct and indirect communication, to solve this ambivalence. While *Mitteilung* can denote something that is “brought” or imposed upon us without our own meddling, like a sudden revelation, a bit of unforeseen news, or pre-formulated knowledge, as we have seen with the direct communication of *videns meddelelse*, it also describes as process of self-awareness and interaction, which happens through the indirect communication of *kunnens meddelelse*. This division relies on the delineation of the simultaneous, paradoxical, two meanings at the core of the verb *teilen*: to share and to separate. The latter requires “imparting” or “giving away a share”; the former, on the other hand, expresses an explicit participation and relation between one and another.

For Benjamin there is no such division. Rather, in his early essay, “Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen,” he turns to the linguistic ambivalence inherent in *mit-teilen*. In order to rescue *Mitteilung*'s meaning as a long and continuous process, Benjamin uses *Mitteilung* to show that one cannot reduce language to a definite and absolute system, but must instead see language as the possibility through which we understand and engage with the world in first place. On language, Benjamin writes: “Es ist fundamental zu wissen, daß dieses geistige Wesen sich *in der Sprache mitteilt* und nicht *durch* die Sprache.”¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ I am leaving aside, here, more immediate disciples of Kierkegaard such as Karl Jaspers, who directly engage Kierkegaard's method of indirectness in their work.

¹¹¹ Benjamin, “Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen,” 142.

The distinction between communication (*mitteilen*) *in* language and *through* language sets up Benjamin's thinking of language beyond signification towards human expression (*Ausdruck*), that is, thinking (of) language as the condition of experience and knowledge, and not as instrument of their transmission. What, then, is language *in general*, and furthermore, what is human language? Benjamin quickly dismisses a view of language that allows humans to definitely identify the things around us. Language does not facilitate identification; rather, it is a marker of separation between the speaking human being (speaking, here, meaning any participation in language) and the material world, the *Dingwelt*. The nature of such a separation is that it exists as an all-surrounding condition (this is the *in*), that is, it cannot be bridged by language (this would be the *through*) or overcome by agreeing on a particular word or name for a particular object.

To call a lamp “a lamp,” for example, does not mean that we have used language say what a lamp is once and for all, or what all lamps are, or even what this particular lamp, the one in front of us, may be.¹¹² There is, Benjamin writes, always something that cannot be completely expressed in language, something that exists outside every attempt to name it, something that is not “mittelbar” and cannot be *shared*.¹¹³ The only part of a lamp that can be shared is the “Sprach-Lampe,” the “Lampe in der Mitteilung,” not the lamp itself.¹¹⁴ Language, when misunderstood as mere transmission and exchange of words that denote things, can only function as a tool of communication, can only ever be an instrument. If we were to treat language as a tool of communication, we would wrongly believe that we would merely have to use it in order to understand the things around us. But the lamp and our word for the lamp are not the same—the lamp's “geistige Wesen” and its “sprachliche Wesen” are two different parts of what ultimately

¹¹² We are reminded, here, of Eduard Mörike's poem “Auf eine Lampe”:

Wie reizend alles! Lachend, und ein sanfter Geist
Des Ernstes doch ergossen um die ganze Form –
Ein Kunstgebild der echten Art. Wer achtet sein?
Was aber schön ist, selig schein es in ihm selbst.

¹¹³ Benjamin, “Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen,” 142.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

makes up the lamp. What can be shared when we call a lamp “a lamp” can only ever be its “sprachliche Wesen,” that which is “mittelbar” (indirect). Its “geistiges Wesen,” however, is “unmittelbar” (direct or immediate), that is to say, it cannot be mediated and therefore not shared through language.¹¹⁵

The difference between “mittelbar” and “unmittelbar” brings us back to the paradox of *teilen*. Both prepositions—*in* and *through*—express, in Benjamin’s essay, a relation between *mitteilen* and language. One way to describe each of their relations is to say that *in* locates “mitteilen” within language and assumes they both happen in the same realm (imagined as a circle encompassing everything that can be communicated), whereas *through* produces a distance, a separation between *mitteilen* and language (where language is the vehicle, imagined as a line, between who communicates and what is communicated). But, paradoxically, the former—to communicate *in* language—separates the “thing” from the “word” (“das geistige Wesen” and “das sprachliche Wesen”), while the latter—to communicate *through* language—pronounces thing and word as the same and collapses them into a single unit shared by both. Both *in* and *through* formulate a relation between *mitteilen* and language that includes the simultaneity of “sharedness” and “separation.” The two meanings of *teilen*—to share and to separate—are thus reflected in the two prepositions Benjamin uses with regard to language.

Remembering the double capacity of *teilen* helps to recognize the complex roles of “mittelbar” and “unmittelbar” in Benjamin’s view of language. Like Kierkegaard, Benjamin formulates his notion of *Mitteilung* along a distinction between directness and indirectness. But while Kierkegaard distinguishes between a direct and an indirect form of *meddelelse* that refer mainly to modes of transmission (and the implications thereof), Benjamin extends the notions of directness and indirectness to what lies beyond the transmission. “Mittelbar” and “unmittelbar,” unlike

¹¹⁵ For the English-speaking reader, this might be confusing: *unmittelbar* means *not* mediated, that is, direct, while *mittelbar* means that something can be, or has to be, mediated, that is, it means *indirect*.

Kierkegaard's indirect and direct, refer not to the ways in which sharing happens, but determine what parts of something can be shared at all. The lamp in Benjamin's example is never fully "unmittelbar" in language since all language can do is to make some aspect of the lamp (its "sprachliches Wesen") "mittelbar." "Unmittelbar," on the other hand, is only language itself, which is "in the purest sense the 'medium' of Mitteilung."¹¹⁶ The important distinction, then, is that while for Kierkegaard, *meddelelse* can be either one or the other (direct or indirect), *Mitteilung* in Benjamin's use does not itself split into two modes of transmission, but delineates as a whole the triangular relation between thing, language, and human. It does not describe a relation between two entities, but requires a third factor, agent, or intervention that is neither, in Benjamin's example, the lamp nor us. This third factor is the lamp's language (or its "sprachliche Wesen") that at the same time is what is "mittelbar" and shareable about it. What we can understand of a thing is always mediated in language (hence what becomes "mittelbar" is the thing, and what is "unmittelbar" is the language), what we can name is always only the thing's mediated and indirect linguistic being. The triangular relation is, in fact, a multi-angular one: the thing, the thing-in-language, the human, and the language (in this case a mix of German and English).

It is tempting to assume that language is the medium separating us from the true core of the thing.¹¹⁷ But there is no in-between: language extends to "schlechthin alles," to everything we could possibly experience in the world: "Es gibt kein Geschehen oder Ding weder in der belebten noch in der unbelebten Natur, das nicht in gewisser Weise an der Sprache teilhätte, denn es ist jedem wesentlich, seinen geistigen Inhalt mitzuteilen."¹¹⁸ At first, such a statement appears as radical negation of any existence outside of language.¹¹⁹ There is nothing, Benjamin writes, which does not partake in language, whether we talk about beings or things, the living or the dead. One reading of

¹¹⁶ Benjamin, "Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen," 142.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 140f. Benjamin does not use true; what I mean here is the "geistige Wesen" or thing "itself."

¹¹⁸ Here, Benjamin also begins to develop his notion of "Dingsprache," the language of things.

¹¹⁹ Indeed, in what follows Benjamin writes that we cannot imagine a complete absence of language.

the “inherent communicability” of everything is to say that language is the prerequisite of existence, to tie being so closely to language that we cannot reasonably separate them. But we can also read this proclamation as a reversal of roles: it is not the human who imposes communication upon the world, but the world who urges its communication upon us.¹²⁰ In this reading, then, the implication of such a reversal is that we can no longer treat language as an instrument of communication, since humans, now passive, do not exclusively control it. Such a reading reinforces Benjamin’s earlier assertion that there is no *Mitteilung through* language, but that *Mitteilung* means an engagement with the world *in* language. It is in the nature of every occurrence and every thing, Benjamin writes, to communicate its spiritual (*geistig*) content. Here, however, “seinen Inhalt mitzuteilen” does not only imply an active (or, one would say in the case of events and things, magical) act of communication. It also reads that it is in the nature of every occurrence and every thing to *share* its content *with* something (*mit etwas teilen*), that is, to not exist in ontological isolation, but to be made common and emerge, at least partially, through language. In English, when we use “communication” we have mostly forgotten that “to communicate” can also mean this rescue from silent singularity, this looking for the unseen, the unspoken, and the unknown glimmering in the dark beyond our reach.

For Benjamin, this rescue is the ground of *Mitteilung*. On these grounds, *Mitteilung* is fundamentally committed to a sharing that does not begin with imparting, but whose very condition are the paradoxical forces of “teilen,” marked by both distance and communion. “Die Ansicht,” Benjamin critiques, “ist die bürgerliche Auffassung der Sprache, deren Unhaltbarkeit und Leere sich mit steigender Deutlichkeit im folgenden ergeben soll. Sie besagt: Das Mittel der Mitteilung ist das Wort, ihr Gegenstand die Sache, ihr Adressat ein Mensch.”¹²¹ This separation between medium,

¹²⁰ One reading of this reversal is that things, like us, are their own agents, existing in their own rights. Kathrin Busch has suggested this to be true for Benjamin’s *Spachphilosophie* and *Dingsprache* in general: “In dieser Verkehrung des gewohnten Verhältnisses von Mensch (aktiv) und Dingwelt (passiv) artikuliert sich eine ebenso weitreichende wie bedenkenswerte Umdeutung ihres Verhältnisses.” See Busch, “Dingsprache und Sprachmagie: Zur Idee latenter Wirksamkeit bei Walter Benjamin.”

¹²¹ Benjamin, “Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen,” 144.

subject, and addressee on the one hand, and word, content, and human being on the other, epitomizes a misunderstanding of language largely uncontested by the theories of language of Benjamin's time, and, we will see, in particular by theories of communication emerging from sciences after World War II.¹²² Benjamin's humanist critique reminds us that neither language as a whole nor *Mitteilung* can be easily divided into these goal-oriented functions seeking to reduce both to mere instruments of organizing communication. They are human practices, yes, but language—and *Mitteilung*—expands beyond human control. Both are expressions of the human pursuit to make things universally shareable while, in doing so, having to leave behind the parts that cannot be shared in language. Language, for Benjamin, is so essentially tied to *being* that we cannot think of *being* without language, that we cannot even imagine the absence of language. *Mitteilung* as foundation of expression and not its event, to no lesser extent, makes possible to imagine ourselves as human beings, to imagine ourselves a part of the world at the same time as we stand apart from it, glaring at its magic.

Mitteilung therefore fulfills an important philosophical function for both Kierkegaard and Benjamin. For Benjamin, we have seen, *Mitteilung* is not the content of expression, but the condition for language *überhaupt*, the condition of sharedness and hence for expression in language in general. By making *meddelelse* the centerpiece of his distinction, Kierkegaard, on the other hand, formulates a significant split between sharing as practical function (to transmit information and knowledge) and sharing as social capacity (to engage with one's own sense of being and with one another)—yet, both sides are bound to each other by the concept of *meddelelse*, and both depend on it to fully unfold. Neither Benjamin nor Kierkegaard offers a practical resolution. We will find no definite structure or the relief of a decisive explanation for *Mitteilung* and *meddelelse*, for how to be better indirect

¹²² The everyday notion of *Mitteilung* Benjamin rejects here will dominate most theories of communication, which define language in terms of transmission (or also transmission in terms of language).

communicators, or for letting go of our sense of control over language. Their writing, far from any such answer, even prevents us from finding utility in *Mitteilung* and *meddelelse*, instead, we have to approach their writing as its own instance of the unfurling of *Mitteilung* and *meddelelse*, as performance of a quality of *Mitteilung* and *meddelelse* both philosophers aim to redeem.

Benjamin's mode of critique, Sam Weber writes, "leaves one not with the answer to a question but with the *demand* that the question presupposes."¹²³ Like Benjamin's writing, like *Mitteilung*, such a demand dismantles the finitude any answer may offer to make us feel at ease. To understand, then, *Mitteilung* as form of making visible the precondition of the possibility to answer rather than the instrument of delivering an answer, leaves us with a whole new set of options for how *Mitteilung* works as a concept of communication beyond the concrete transmission of information. Similarly, Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms¹²⁴, his fragmentary notes on the distinction between *direct* and *indirect communication*, his setting up contradictory lines of thought throughout his work all realize a mode of indirect communication Kierkegaard performs as a writer—not to present, in writing, the knowledge of what *meddelelse* amounts to, but to show how knowledge emerges from the demand to know. The work of *Mitteilung* is, without ultimatum, a practice in the making.

Benjamin's and Kierkegaard's use of *meddelelse/Mitteilung* has shown us that we can think of it as a continual and long-winded (indirect and "mittelbar") human, social, practice. But let's not forget that to think of *Mitteilung* as such practice has been met with much resistance, rendering *Mitteilung*, as I have presented it in this chapter so far, an archaic precursor of the past. Today, *Mitteilung*'s predominant notion of "message," of a vehicle for the transmission of information, or even more, its becoming synonymous with "information," have made it difficult to attribute to *Mitteilung* this

¹²³ Weber, "Piecework," 215.

¹²⁴ Consider, for example, the pseudonyms under which his earlier works are published or Anti-Climacus's rejection of Climacus's ideas in the later *The Sickness Unto Death*.

other, second, meaning.¹²⁵ Benjamin, in his “Aufgabe des Übersetzers,” published five years after his essay on language, asks: “Was ‘sagt’ denn eine Dichtung? Was teilt sie mit? Sehr wenig dem, der sie versteht. Ihr Wesentliches ist nicht Mitteilung, nicht Aussage,” and severs poetry from *Mitteilung* altogether.¹²⁶ For his storyteller, twenty years after “Über Sprache,” the informational purposes of *Mitteilung* are, even more explicitly, anathema to the communication of experience and wisdom, and, most importantly, to the task of literature. Both Benjamin’s earlier use of *Mitteilung* as a practice and his later representations of *Mitteilung* as mere informational content put pressure on the possibilities of *Mitteilung* as mode of communication, as medium of transmitting information, and its role in where we draw the lines between what is information and what, to follow the demand of his own question, poetry is sharing with us. Well before information became something that matters, Kierkegaard’s investment in the processes of communication foreshadows the Information Age’s division between the goal-oriented speech of information and the multi-layered complexity of poetic language. An unlikely philosopher of information, Kierkegaard, allows us to extend our thinking of information beyond its emergence in the twentieth century, and with it, to take seriously the presupposing demands of asking, again and differently, Benjamin’s question: what kind of information does poetry share?

4. The Messenger Gene: Christian Bök’s *Xenotext*

In the previous chapter—on memory and storage—I contrasted two very different poets to show how their poems put pressure on the limits of an analogy that places the informational term “storage” on one side and the poetic concern “memory” on the other. *Mitteilung*, rather than suggesting another analogy, presents us with an embodied contradiction that operates on a similar scale: its informational, direct transmission on the one hand, and its poetic, indirect process of

¹²⁵ See, for example, the translation of Wittgenstein’s axiom, in which *Mitteilung* becomes “information.”

¹²⁶ Benjamin, “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers,” 9.

communication on the other. Looking at Kierkegaard and Benjamin's use of *meddelelse/Mitteilung* gives us a path to further test the possibilities of *Mitteilung* as a mode of communication alongside its being a medium of transmitting information. I turn therefore, in what follows, to two examples of how poetry manages its relation to *Mitteilung*.

My first example, Canadian poet Christian Bök's *The Xenotext*, tests both the literal and figurative dimensions of *Mitteilung* by turning a tiny bacterium into a poetic specimen. Bök, having spent years in a laboratory and on biochemical research, is in the process of creating "living" poetry using DNA as poetic medium. It is—and, the poet hopes, will always be—a poem in the making: a short sonnet is enciphered into a DNA string and implanted into the genome of the highly disease-resistant bacterium *Deinococcus radiodurans*, where it infinitely remains part of its genetic fabric. Thanks to Bök's manipulations of a chemical alphabet—the well-known deoxyribonucleosides A, T, C, and G, that make up the base pairs of the living genome—the alien text once implanted triggers the bacterium's organism to produce a protein in response. The protein causes the bacterium to fluoresce and can subsequently be isolated and deciphered as text. But Bök does not leave this textual response to chance or entirely to nature's course. As a result of careful algorithmic composition, the decoded sequence of amino acids reveals a second morphological sonnet in response to the first. Together, the two sonnets, titled "Orpheus" and "Eurydice," form a poetic pair corresponding with each other, to reach through the bacterium, throughout its infinite lifetime, its readers. The "cell that becomes not only an archive for storing a poem, but also a machine for writing a poem," offers a *Mitteilung* brought to us via messenger RNA, an experiment in genetics and poetics bringing together vocabularies of both information and poetry to let us imagine a future of their intertwined importance.¹²⁷

¹²⁷ Bök, *The Xenotext. Book 1*, 150.

Coming close to the most miniscule form of data, DNA has become understood as “code of life,” a literalized metaphor implying that genetic code contains significant information of our being.¹²⁸ For Bök, the genetic code is a fundamental player in the production of textual life: it creates a new poetic form both technological and aesthetic in nature—a coded stanza hidden between genetic data, a poetic bacterium writing living poetry. DNA as *Mitteilung* in Bök’s experiment, then, serves two specific tasks: to transmit and to store. The idea to use DNA artificially as storage for information, that is, information other than its natural composition, has emerged in recent decades as practical solution to problems of preservation. In search for a sustainable, pragmatic medium for the storage of sensitive or large amounts of data, a group of scientists around Pak Chung Wong has turned to DNA to put this idea into practice by creating “organic data memory.”¹²⁹ “Ancient humans,” they write

preserved their knowledge by engraving bones and stones. About two millennia ago people invented paper to publish their thought. Today, we use magnetic media and silicon chips to store our data. But bones and stones erode, paper disintegrates, and electronic memory degrades. All these storage media *require constant attention to maintain their information content*...it’s time to find a new medium.¹³⁰ (my emphasis)

No longer engaged in “speculative science fiction,” the scientists successfully encoded parts of the song “It’s a Small World” into a synthesized DNA strand and were able to extract its information unaltered afterwards.¹³¹ What differentiates the modern human from her or his ancient predecessors, Wong suggests, is the capacity to manage *time* more effectively by not having to worry about

¹²⁸ See Kay, *Who Wrote the Book of Life?*; Roof, *The Poetics of DNA*; Morange, *The Misunderstood Gene*; Doyle, *On beyond Living*.

¹²⁹ Wong, Wong, and Foote, “Organic Data Memory Using the DNA Approach,” 98.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹³¹ Aside from “compressing” information to a miniscule amount of space, Wong proposes the implantation of such DNA strands into disease-resistant bacteria, capable of surviving almost any outside threat, as a viable alternative to inanimate storage and archiving solutions. None of these properties offer a practical advantage over what microchips can already do, including protecting information from radiation, earthquakes, or coffee spills. What’s compelling about the idea of organic data memory is less the approach’s economic practicability and possibility than its potential as living text, animate archive, and biomedium, which, at the border of imaginative science, shines forth with the speculative power of a scientific and poetic experiment. Here, we might also think of what has become known as biopoetics, biomedica, or maybe something like biosemiotics which regards biology as a sign system—every sense signifies something (hunger, exhaustion etc.); emphasizes subjectivity.

“maintaining information content.” Here is where I want to turn our attention to the temporal dimensions of such maintenance. Rather than treating the materiality or durability of “storage media” as primary concern following the media-evolution Wong et al., the possibility of synthetically encoding information into a DNA strand emphasizes the problem of transmission over time. It makes, then, an interesting test case of *Mitteilung*—the sharing and transmitting of information that requires both human attention and creates a medium for content.

One might read Bök’s poem, then, not just as a particular example of genetic writing, but towards a general mode of writing and language. What, the *Xenotext Experiment* asks, is the nature and operation of language, especially language conceived of as a coded medium for the expression and transmission of information? How do analogies between communication channels such as storage devices and human memory shape the ideas of absence, loss, and forgetting intrinsic to both? And, what does all this tell us about the ongoing living power of poetry as object and expression in an age defined by the practices of information?

Placed in a living organism, the design of DNA as coded medium presents itself as textual and animate condition for *Xenotext*. These conditions shape the two tasks—transmission and storage—that the *Xenotext* presents as the two features of its analogy between the scientific experiment and the poem. First, the science: Bök uses DNA as code to create and transmit a message. It matters little, at this point, that the message is a poem: the code simply translates alphabetic letters into chemical bases to create a corresponding cypher. On an operational level, such a code is essentially indifferent to whether what kind of information it organizes and transmits—it could be a poem or a bus schedule. The code’s indifference towards genre, form, or content removes, in a first step, all cultural and social contexts from what the code encrypts.¹³² We cannot immediately tell, by looking at the encoded DNA strand, that it is, in fact, a poem. The beauty of

¹³² That is, Shannon treats the alphabet the same as Morse code the same as Chinese writing because it all creates the same problems and is ultimately reducible to bits and units.

code lies, partly, in its “contextlessness,” in its ability to mask the information at its origin to create a new version that is yet the same. We do not need to know the code in order to see its outcome; one need not, for example, understand how a website runs in order to use it. Similarly for code and poetry, in Bök’s case. The DNA cypher facilitates both secrecy and the programming processes whose outcomes render the code invisible. Like the website, the bacterium itself functions as a programmed medium through which we can, later, access the poem. DNA in *Xenotext* works as code as it governs the process of writing the poem. But the process of encoding does not alone underlie the text; nor is the code written to make the poem *visible* at a certain point. Rather, the code has an authorial function for the poem in the making; it operates as inventive force, expressing words in terms of nucleotides. What the poems tell us, then, is that they regard text as informational, as information-bearing, in both its readerly and writerly modes.

Think about information-bearing: formally speaking, the relation between memory and technology in Bök’s poem is part of a larger structure of imaginative associations between poetic text and living organisms. The *storage* of the text in an enduring bacterium proposes a method that ensures both the poem’s survival and the preservation of its storage mechanism. Capable of reproducing the poem over multiple generations without errors, the bacterium is imagined in its near endless capacity for storage beyond the death of the single-cell organism. More specifically, rather than a nostalgic sense of loss of continuity and memory, discrete representations of life and poetic text in the form of DNA address the ontological nature of the potentially informative as such. If we regard the speculative character of the experiment as a prospective attempt to store and reproduce information as an act of poetic writing, its engagement with life at the same time broaches the lyrical dimension of what we’ve come to understand as the information of life (or, DNA).

The sense of organization of information and its interpretation is heightened by the DNA poems’ orderliness. *Xenotext*’s formal constraint, based on a precise encoding of nucleotides to

trigger the bacterium's protein reaction, creates the two symbiotic poems, which are exactly reproduced over bacterial generations:

Any style of life
is prim
The faery is rosy
of glow¹³³

Beyond their textual reproduction, the poems' formal composition possesses a repetitive quality of its own. The antithetical lines perpetuate this dynamic most strikingly in the correspondence of "prim" and "glow," contrasting the properness of stylization with the spontaneous and seemingly unprim glow of the faery and its bacterial host. As a result of the coding process, both poems mirror each other syntactically in their formal structure (each has the same number of letters and words), but the responding second poem's sensation of a rosy glow pragmatically resists the first's assertions of ontological regulation. Some styles of life are prim, yes; but some glow, and there is primness in the glowing. The ironic bacterial response to "style" resides in the word's meanings as behavior as well as writing; for "style" is a distinct manner and also a particular composition. Between composition and manner, *Xenotext's* organic and organized structure evolves from this constraint of style, and so arranges its miniscule data as aesthetic activity within the infinity of language and of life.

Infinite, of course, only in the grand scheme of the universe. Or, maybe, anything that lies beyond *one* life, a human life or perhaps all human life, can be understood in terms of infinity. The bacterium will outlive the poet, but not the poem. Hosted by the bacterium, the poem is detached from human mortality and error in order to exist in a foreign life form and to become the *Xenotext*, the strange and foreign visitor, the *xenos*, to the bacterium's cellular habitat. While its origin remains human, its transmission and storage are entrusted to the longer-lasting life of the *Deinococcus*

¹³³ The poem is not included in the first volume of the *Xenotext*. It is, at this stage, not even certain if these will be the definitive lines, but it can currently be assumed that they are. See Davis, "The Xenotext."

radiodurans. We can, in this sense, think of the experiment as a xenotransplantation, a transplantation of text (code, or the “book of life”) from one species to another, whereby the written poem is implanted into a foreign organism. Wouldn’t the poem at one point cease to be a “poem,” since once becoming part of the bacterial fabric it no longer exists as a human practice? *Xeno* denotes this paradox: the simultaneous hospitality and foreignness, as well as the paradox of a continual approximation to an unreachd goal found in the pun on *xeno/Zeno*. What is strange or foreign about the text is not *merely* the fact that it exists in a foreign life form, it is also semantically and symbolically a poem about foreignness. As an experiment, it possesses a certain measure of strangeness. A symbolic *xeno*, for instance, can be found in the relation between the two lines of the couplet that establishes a formal antithesis. The contrast, here, lies in the more “plain” spoken quality of the first line with the “obviously” symbolic qualities of the second. “Life” and “faery” are antithetical in that they represent nature and supernature. This antithesis, in turn, is crossed by the homophones faery and ferry (ferry = the fer in transfer = or the phor in metaphor), and, as mentioned, in “prim” and “glow.” Elsewhere, what may look symbolic (“rosy of glow”) turns out to be a literal reference to the medium of the poem. Bök creates a living poem that is metaphorical and literal; alive, and *a style of life*, determined by poetic genes. *Xeno* to delimit the *text*.

With the messenger RNA as its mode of transmission, the *Xenotext* offers also reflection of this process. The couplet establishes a question-and-answer pattern, a call-and-response program, organizing the two halves of the poem as an antithesis. The orphesian call elicits a eurydician response, the former sealing the latter’s fate by bearing the responsibility for whatever happens after the DNA’s makeup imposes itself on the bacterium’s protein reaction. The encoded *Mitteilung*, however, succeeds where the mythical Orpheus fails: infinitely stored and reproduced, the poem lives on patiently and without looking back. The two sonnets survive together, over and over, rewriting the tragic fate of the once doomed couple. What begins as a *message*, that is, as information

that is encoded into the DNA strand transmitting the poem through the darkness of cells towards the protein reaction's light, enfolds as *Mitteilung* in its full sense—a shared space of dialogic exchange that does not conclude with the receiving of a message, but continues its back-and-forth existence beyond a simple transmission.

Beyond its scientific apparatus, *The Xenotext* does not merely make use of the more obvious terms of information such as genes, codes, and algorithms, but embeds Bök's projects in the deep traditions of the writing of poetry. The bacterial poem as a “message sent to us,” as an instance of *Mitteilung*, is at its most sensational, revealing on its surface how poetry's engagement with informational practices ought to be thought, can be read and written, together. The experiment has been in the making for over a decade, during which snippets, progress reports, and updates (published both by Bök himself and others) ignited the hopeful excitement of what a successfully implanted poem-DNA would mean for the future of poetry, and more, the future of writing if indeed such a future could imagine libraries as bacteria, books as DNA, and genetic code as poetic meter. The appearance of *The Xenotext, Book 1* (published in 2015) succeeded a long anticipation—not only of, finally, the complete lines of the bacterial sonnet, but also, perhaps, a grain of clarity that would complement the speculative hope of Bök's astounding experiment with the material reality of the bacterium that carries a poem for the future.

The Xenotext, however, is not that document of revelation. We learn very little about the experiment “itself,” and neither the poem's lines or their genetic code are revealed in this first volume. Rather, the book presents itself as a collection of materials surrounding and preparing us for the *Xenotext*. It is, in that sense, a documentation, a kind of multi-layered and multi-medial manual of the project, including QR codes alongside its title pages, figures of certain molecule

structures and DNA strands, and images of protein sequences.¹³⁴ It stands out, as a book of poetry, in these engagements with scientific forms of writing and presenting materials (documentation, visualization, summaries, explanations) and a wide array of scientific methods (collecting samples, testing, analyzing). While we are still waiting for bacterial messenger to bring us the news of its realization, we get lost in the pleasure of browsing through pages filled with historical, poetic, and scientific knowledge. We wait, and we speculate, until the book makes us realize that the projection of the bacterial sonnet's relationship into the future has wide-reaching roots into poetry's past.

The first volume of *The Xenotext* begins with an announcement, the proclamation of a beginning. "Welcome, Wraith and Reader, to the Hadean Eon of the Earth."¹³⁵ Its first word, the first word of the book, bears all the grandeur that comes with its proclamatory promise: to welcome the reader to enter the unfamiliar realm of this book (evoking Virgil's welcoming to the Inferno), to announce the moment that began the formation of the Earth (known as "The Late Heavy Bombardement," which is also the poem's title) to proclaim the origins of all life, and, to imagine our presence into this yet lifeless eon as if we could be right there watching our cosmic beginning. This welcome is the first *Mitteilung*. Both announcement and imagined relocation, the welcoming announcement lets us know "this is where you are," and, at the same time makes the "Hadean Eon" a shared space between the poem and us, the readers, a space we could not occupy otherwise. The work of *Mitteilung*, while relying so heavily on this one word, "welcome," also extends beyond the proclamation. It requires the reader's effort and knowledge not revealed, or only barely revealed, by the sentence, to gain the geological knowledge of the earth and to be willing to take up the

¹³⁴ The QR codes are conversions of each title. Next to each code is a grid of pixels, equal in size, that shows what the code looks like when you run it through an algorithm, John Conway's cellular automaton that consists of a grid of cells governed by a set of mathematical rules. Depending on the initial input (in Bök's example, the QR code of a title), a unique and constantly changing pattern develops from the "seed." The rules define single cells as alive or dead, determined by the status of its neighboring cells. Cells with only one live neighbors die, for example, cells with two or three neighbors survive as live cells, while a dead cell with exactly three live neighbors becomes a live cell again and so on, hence the algorithm's name, "Game of Life."

¹³⁵ Bök, *The Xenotext. Book 1*, 12.

sentence's invitation. The *Mitteilung* of this sentence, then, is twofold: the utterance of an invitation to follow the poem into its cosmos, and the call to the reader to become part of it and share it.

“Reader,” then, signals the extension of that space to the present and the living, a direct address that unfolds in the moment of reading or hearing it. At the moment of being addressed, the reader is summoned to the poetic now—whether she is a reader from the past or a reader in the future. In that way, the “now” we experience in the poem is, however, not just “in the moment.” On the level of poetic time, “now” means the Hadean Eon, a geological period in Earth’s history about four billion years ago. Four billion years—a number beyond our, human, historical comprehension of time, beyond our capacity to “remember,” beyond all myth or lore passed on by the oldest of generations. Equally included in the address are the dead, the ghosts and spirits of the once living.¹³⁶ The mirror image of “wraith” and “reader” figures a parallel configuration between living and dead, suspending time and proclaiming a “here and now” that does not distinguish between the past, present, and future. The suspension of the tenses, providing us with an expanded sense of time, is a remarkable set of parameters the *Xenotext* sets for its experiment on *storage* and *transmission*. The Hadean Eon, as it unfolds poetically in the first pages of the book is, at the same time, a reminder that its origin is indeed a poetic one; its name, borrowed from a myth much, much younger than the eon itself, alludes to the non-worldly hell guarded by Hades, the Greek god of the underworld. On behalf of any other epistemological tools, we turn to poetry to understand and write the history of Earth. Within these intertwined notions of time and our understanding of time, *Mitteilung* functions as a peculiar summons, a call to the timelessness of “life.”

The poem is followed by another short poem, “The Nocturne of Orpheus” (a sonnet that is a perfect anagram of Keats’ “When I Have Fears That I May Cease To Be”), followed by a translation of Book IV of Virgil’s *The Georgics*, which tells in its last verses the story of Orpheus and

¹³⁶ “Wraith,” a word for ghost of Scottish origin, seems to have first appeared in the 16th century in a translation of the *Aeneid* into Middle Scots—another nod, perhaps, to Virgil.

Eurydice. This first part of the book concludes with another sonnet, “The Xenagogue.” The poem is printed on the page next to the epilogue concluding the “poetry” section of the book. The epilogue begins with “Virgil greets us at the Gates of Death to tell us that we love our lovers, but never enough to bring them back from Hell,” a desperate conclusion to the fate of Orpheus and Eurydice who were doomed to be parted in eternity. This fateful myth, we remember, is the poetic theme of the DNA poem. There, the couple exists in eternal response to each other via the double helix and the protein reaction causes by the “Orpheus” sequence. In the “Vita Explicata,” a kind of explanatory appendix at the end of the book, Bök describes the figure of the Xenagogue as:

an escort who guides strangers through foreign terrain (much like Virgil, who takes a poet into Hell). Orpheus, the *xenos* (the ‘foreigner’), enters the underworld, testing its hospitality, expecting the Greek edict of *xenia* (of ‘offerings’) to be honoured. *The Xenotext* is such an alien guest, courting the goodwill of a demonic microbe that might ‘host’ the poem for a future reader.¹³⁷

The end of this section tells us the intricate poetic story of the experiment, moving from the translation of *The Georgics* to a poem telling another version of the theme that enfolds in the bacterium.

The poem itself is a tightly structured Shakespearean sonnet. Each line consists of ten syllables, organized in three quatrains and a couplet and following the abab rhyme structure:

The Poet hammers upon the grim gate
of Dis to demand of demons one night
of rest, the right of each pilgrim to wait,
like a guest, greeted by death at twilight.¹³⁸

We notice in this first stanza, however, the consistent odd enjambments that allow for the rhyme scheme to work. “Gate” and “night” appear in the middle of a sentence, which continues

¹³⁷ Bök, *The Xenotext. Book 1*, 153.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

into the next line. This break through the orderly structure of the rhyme is itself highly structured and runs through all three quatrains. Like internal scaffolding, the offset rhymes are supported by an additional set of rhymes, “grim/pilgrim” and “rest/guest” within the lines. The same structures uphold the other two quatrains, which, like the first, display these intertwined sequences of rhymes embedded in the strict syllabic form of the sonnet. In its consistency, this scheme produces as familiar visual image: the double helix of a genome, the “book of life” that holds the information of the poem’s gene and presents itself as a microscopic look of the poem’s miniscule, syllabic data. We notice, also, that rather than being written in iambic pentameter, the feet are dominantly trochaic. But this should not upset us. The trochees, as if in oppositional response to the usual iambs of a Shakespearean sonnet, complete the binary pattern of communication that governs the *Xenotext*. Orpheus and Eurydice, the living and the dead, the nucleobases and proteins, the host bacterium and the guest poem—the variety of forms of *Mitteilung* behind the scientific endeavor to encode a poem into a bacterium, reveal the stunning terms of communication involved in processes, poetic and scientific alike.

5. Semantic Clouds: Oswald Egger’s *Nichts, das ist*

Having established the notion of *Mitteilung* as it emerges from the analogical relation between the scientific and the poetic in Christian Bök’s *Xenotext Experiment*, I turn now to the poetry of Oswald Egger. Born in 1963 in Southern Tyrol, Egger is one of the most prolific contemporary German-speaking poets, unmatched in his commitment to the overwhelming infinitesimal of poetic language and material. Reading Egger is challenging at every turn: the endless details his poetry bears in its visual and verbal composition, the preciseness with which every syllable is carefully placed on the page, the focus one needs to bring to his poetry to not feel at loss—all mark Egger’s poetry as extraordinary endeavor to make visible poetry’s capacity to unsettle the known and the expected.

In what follows, I focus on three distinct practices to show how *Mitteilung* emerges as poetic figure: first, “rufen” (to call) and “nennen” (to name) as practices of language and speech in Egger’s book *Nichts, das ist* (2001). The tension between “rufen” and “nennen” throughout the book represent two different, entangled aspects of what I identify as poetry’s *Mitteilung*, a poetic practice of information and device of communication revealing the informational nature of poetry’s engagement with language and with itself.

Before I turn to Egger, let me briefly return to Wittgenstein’s far-reaching aphorism: “Vergiß nicht,” he writes, “daß ein Gedicht, wenn auch in der *Sprache der Mitteilung* abgefaßt, nicht im *Sprachspiel der Mitteilung* verwendet wird” (my emphasis).¹³⁹ Contrasting the language of *Mitteilung* with the language-game of *Mitteilung*, Wittgenstein formulates a pivotal distinction between the *language of Mitteilung* and its *language-game*. A poem, while sharing the same language with *Mitteilung*, is clearly separated from *Mitteilung* by participating in an altogether different language-game, that is, by using language with a purpose distinct from any purpose a *Mitteilung* might have. Inevitably, then, in the English translation of Wittgenstein, the word *Mitteilung* appears as “information.” A poem does not inform, a different version of Wittgenstein’s dictum might tell us, even when it uses—as it does—the same words as a memorandum, a note, or any other form of a proper *Mitteilung*.

The practice of this difference governs Egger’s allusion to what he deems the task of the poet:

Ich will mehr wissen über die Zufallshaftigkeit des Zufalls. So wie man sich *in der Sprache nicht mit der Mitteilung zufrieden gibt*, sondern auf ihre innere Grammatik hören möchte. Ich möchte etwas herausfinden über den *Spielraum*, in dem es sich leben ließe.¹⁴⁰

Here, Egger suggests two things: first, that we cannot be content with treating language in terms of its *Mitteilung*, its message. But what does it mean to not simply settle for language’s *Mitteilung*? Like

¹³⁹ Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, §160.

¹⁴⁰ “I want to know more about randomness of chance. Just as one isn’t content, in language, with a *Mitteilung*, but wants to listen to language’s inner grammar. I would like to find out more about the room for play, within which one might live.” See Egger, “Ich will semantische Wolken erzeugen.”

Wittgenstein, whose aphorism begins with acknowledging poetry's engagement with the language of *Mitteilung*, Egger begins his formulation with recognizing the presence of *Mitteilung* in language. *Mitteilung*, this recognition means, is a regular function of language, one that we make use of in our daily practices. It defines, that is, *Mitteilung* as a linguistic practice that is a necessity (since it allows us to communicate), but a necessity that does not reach beyond its mechanical and superficial purpose for sharing information. On the other side of this range, where randomness and chance allow us to surpass the purely informational practice of language, we find poetry. Egger's quote mirrors, in this sense, Wittgenstein's articulation of the difference between poetry and information, separating *Mitteilung* from more complex and richer uses of language, from the capacities of language we cannot reach without the effort of being discontent.

Secondly, that we "cannot be content" with only this function serves, on the other hand, as a reminder that language is not simply a tool of communication, not merely an instrument that people use to exchange a message. Besides the practical function of imparting information, Egger writes, language also contains an "inner grammar," a capacity beyond *Mitteilung* as instrument. If *Mitteilung* is the "outer grammar" of language, a grammar required to organize and regulate language such that we can use it and understand each other, the "inner grammar" of language demands a different attention. Humans, we know, do not simply use language to impart specific information—any cultural activity involves the attention to implicit, underlying, or historical meanings of words. It involves listening, Egger writes, to the "inner grammar," a listening that emerges with being discontent with the *Mitteilung* on the surface of language. Setting up these differences between *Mitteilung*, on the one hand, and *Spielraum*, *inner grammar* and *poetry* on the other, Egger's statement seems in many ways like a perfect reflection of Wittgenstein's proclamation, a different version that says: "even though there is *Mitteilung* in poetry, we cannot be content with it and forget to pay attention to the *Spielraum* of its inner grammar."

Such similarity is both a historical legacy and a striking illustration of *Mitteilung*'s place in the theory and practice of poetry. Earlier in this chapter, I wrote of the slippage of the term that Benjamin exposes in his various uses of *Mitteilung* in his work. Between those later understandings of *Mitteilung* as quasi synonymous with “information,” Wittgenstein’s famous aphorism, and Egger’s quote more than half a decade later, *Mitteilung* has not faced many challenges that would question its status as antagonist to poetry. This legacy is why Egger’s quote is useful here. In presenting, even if only in passing, *Mitteilung* in its limited sense as one-directional transmission of information and as such a non-poetic form of communication, Egger provides us with a framework within which we ought to understand his poetry. A framework, that is, that orients us towards the complexity, difficulty, and opacity of poetry as distinct from any linear understanding of meaning.

Egger expands the Wittgensteinian opposition adding to it another layer, “the randomness of chance” and the possibilities of what might happen, of “how we might live.” The relation between *Mitteilung* and what Egger calls language’s “inner grammar” open up a *Spielraum*, a space that cannot be neatly organized, but that allows for that which cannot be made concrete, which cannot be channeled and transmitted in a linear movement. To search for these possibilities is the task of the poet as it is of the speculative explorer, as if he or she had to set out to discover new imaginative lands, in which we could settle down and build a community. But it is not just any space or a location, it is a *Spielraum*—the space in which a game happens, a space dedicated to a particular game that provides the facilities, tools, machines, and toys necessary to play. It is, by nature, a limited space restricted by the rules that a game dictates, whether we call that game chess or language. At the same time this restrictiveness comes with the possibility of radical freedom. Because the limitation of rules also allows for exceptions, randomness, and chance, because of the subjunctive “leben ließe” (might live), we have to imagine *Spielraum* as endless space, as space that harbors infinite

possibilities, activated by our engagement within it. Playing, that is, challenges the earnestness of any limitation by enjoying a certain kind of freedom that comes with testing the limits of universal rules.

For Egger's poetry, there is another definition of *Spielraum* that matters: *Spielraum* also means "leeway," the space that allows different and contradicting meanings and an amount of freedom that comes with every set of rules. In hermeneutics, the term *Spielraum* is found to describe a framework that allows for diverging interpretations of a text, an utterance, or an action. In his 1987 essay "Historik und Sprache," Hans-Georg Gadamer writes:

Wir folgen zwar wie die anderen Naturwesen Zwängen, Drängen, Dispositionen wie getrieben—und dennoch ist da ein Spielraum von Möglichkeiten, der uns bleibt, ein Spielraum anderer Art, der für uns geöffnet ist. Es ist der Raum der dahingestellten Möglichkeiten, der Plausibilitäten, die nicht nur im Spielraum des Offengelassenen stehen, mit dem der Gedanke spielt, sondern in dem auch die Entscheidungen stehen, in denen sich der beständige Kampf um die Herrschaft und Unterliegen abspielt, der Spielraum menschlicher Geschichte.¹⁴¹

Leaving aside the greater importance of language and dialogue Gadamer ascribes to "hermeneutic experience," I want to emphasize, here, the conceptual richness of *Spielraum* as a term governing the philosophical investment in processes of human communication and interpretation.¹⁴² *Spielraum* is not just a side-effect of (natural) rules, but is perceived as space that allows us humans to understand ourselves as human, that is, a space that presents itself as culture rather than nature and so as space created and determined and manipulated (in both its best and worst senses) by humans. For Gadamer, the *Spielraum* of hermeneutics always also carries the burden of freedom as human history and the "struggle over authority and obedience" are not merely imaginative play but demand fateful decision. It also becomes clear, then, that *Spielraum* designates, even in its simplest understanding, not merely an open and undefined space of limitless possibilities or a recreational distraction as its name might suggest. To "play" here, is an earnest activity. The tension underlying the term denotes both the freedom, imagination, and seeming idleness of a "room for play" devoid of any serious

¹⁴¹ Gadamer, "Historik und Sprache (1987)," 326.

¹⁴² See Gadamer, "Sprache als Medium der hermeneutischen Erfahrung."

consequences on the one hand, and very real and serious “decisions” that follow from facing the possibilities of a “room of possibilities left undecided.” Only then we begin to see why *Spielraum* is a hermeneutic tool of human activity beyond any natural dispositions: because these decisions call for acts of interpretation, they depend on communication and dialogue between those involved. “This not-unbound openness,” Andrzej Wiercinski writes, “grants a *Spielraum*, a leeway, a volume for the dialoguing partners to evolve in and involve themselves in. As they dialogue, they enter what Gadamer describes as the to-and-fro motion of play.”¹⁴³

This “to-and-fro motion of play” characterizing Gadamer’s hermeneutic *Spielraum* returns us to *Mitteilung*. Both terms—*Spielraum* and *Mitteilung*—share their fundamental concern for dialogue, transmission, and communication. While for Gadamer *Spielraum* presents the opportunity of dialogic communication, of a continuous back and forth testing the limits of what Wiercinski calls a “not-unbound openness,” for Kierkegaard and Benjamin *Mitteilung* provides a similar possibility for human communication. There, *Mitteilung*’s grounding in “sharedness” allows us to think of *Mitteilung* as process, which, like *Spielraum*, is both free and constrained. The stunning similarity between thinking *Spielraum* as hermeneutic device and thinking *Mitteilung* at the center of the relation between the human, language, and the world reveals the core concern of these two figures: how do certain forms of communication facilitate human understanding?

A brief look at the history and etymology of hermeneutics makes these concerns about transmission and communication visible. The Greek word ἑρμηνεύω (“hermeneuo”), from which the term most likely derives means, among other things, “to translate,” “to interpret,” or “to explain.”¹⁴⁴ Any of these three forms require *communication* to take place, they require, on one side that which needs to be translated, interpreted, or explained and on the other side the one who does the work of reading and comprehending. That this process depends on a great deal of mediation is

¹⁴³ See Wiercinski, *Gadamer’s Hermeneutics and the Art of Conversation*, 294.

¹⁴⁴ See Ficara, *Texte zur Hermeneutik*, 10–12.

figured commonly in the Hermes, the messenger of the Greek gods. Delivering and explaining divine messages to their mortal recipients, Hermes mainly represents the mediator between the gods' intentions and the worldly human enterprises shaped by their celestial fate.

Often, Hermes's messages are seen as translations that require some interpretative effort and explanation. In Homer, one of the most prominent sources featuring the messenger, such efforts are portrayed by the role the character of Hermes performs as a character. In the *Odyssey*, for example, Zeus sends Hermes with a message to the nymph Calypso to free Odysseus from her hostage.¹⁴⁵ Hermes explains the command to Calypso, who, fearing Zeus's vengeful anger, sets Odysseus free; in the *Illiad*, Hermes assists Priam in guiding him to Achilles to retrieve his son Hector's body.¹⁴⁶ In these instances, Hermes not only delivers a message, but is an active part of the plot. Through him, Odysseus or Priam change the course of their fate—a fate they can never fully comprehend and only, piece by piece, understand by interpreting and acting upon Hermes's messages. That a “message” is not merely an act of transmission but involves many an instability, too, is figured in the character himself. Hermes is not only an obedient messenger, but often depicted as both cunning and untrustworthy: “Slayer of oxen,” we read in the Homeric “Hymn to Hermes,” “trickster, busy one, comrade of the feast, this song of yours is worth fifty cows, and I believe that presently we shall settle our quarrel peacefully. But come now, tell me this, resourceful son of Maia.”¹⁴⁷ Hermes, that is, represents an anthropomorphic version of the “message” itself, forcing us to take an extended look at what happens between the sending and the receiving of a message.

The complicated mechanics involving a “message” figured in the mythical image of Hermes the messenger is what grounds the framework of any hermeneutic interpretative effort. If we understand reading in terms of communicative processes involved in the formulation, transmission,

¹⁴⁵ Homer, *The Odyssey*, V: 1-147.

¹⁴⁶ Homer, *The Iliad*, XXIV: 349-467.

¹⁴⁷ Hugh, *Hesiod, the Homeric Hymns, and Homerica*, 395.

and reception of a text, we ought to pay attention to “text” not (or not only) as an artefact, but as a process that consists of multiple steps, which, as Gadamer recognized, produce also the uncertainty of an undefinable *Spielraum*. Like Hermes representing at once obedience to his source (the gods), his own playful trickery, and an interpretative effort by those who interact with him, a “message,” then, is not simply what can be reduced to its content but ought to be considered within all parameters of its composition. These parameters include, against all desire to limit a “message” to its tangible parts, the never-ending *Spielraum* of the human to-and-fro motion of dialogue, a limit that Shannon and Weaver’s theory of communication aimed to manifest all too clearly when it described the process of communication as linear transmission of information. To emphasize, then, the shifting dynamic of these various parameters—and the example of Hermes—is not to say that a “message” is either never fully comprehensible or always reducible to its calculable parts, or that perhaps neither is true. Rather, to understand and imagine “message” as governing a variety of processes of communication allows us to see that whatever we mean by “communication,” it manages processes that are fundamentally rooted in human engagement, understanding, and interpretation.

Certain figures, then, manage these processes in different ways. They are what Janich calls a “linguistic and verbal practice” (“sprachliche Praxis”), a practice that allows us to assume, for example, certain characteristics as human characteristic, that is, as *particularly* human as opposed to, say, that of an animal or a machine.¹⁴⁸ Not only do the figures of communication in this chapter encompass the managing of communicative processes, but they manifest these processes of characteristics *particular* to a given process. We have seen Hermes figuring at once the sending and receiving of a message and the message itself, we have learned from Kierkegaard and Benjamin how to approach *Mitteilung* as powerful figure of simultaneous sharing and dividing, and we now

¹⁴⁸ See Janich, *Der Mensch und andere Tiere. Das zweideutige Erbe Darwins*.

encounter Egger's emphasis of *Spielraum* as poetic territory harboring the to-and-fro motion and "randomness of chance" involved in dialogic play.¹⁴⁹ Each of these three offers us its own concept of the communicative exchanges it is involved in.

All three, however, return—and return us—to one basic insight: that all human communication is social. Which is to say, no simple illustration could possibly figure *all* of the complexity of social life, as no one figure could possibly illustrate all of the ways humans engage in communication. It should not unsettle us, then, when Gadamer, for example, simply writes of a "Spielraum anderer Art," a *Spielraum* of a vague and undefined different kind, or Egger alludes to language's "inner grammar," an auratic grammar revealing itself only to the careful listener, or when Hermes the messenger is both trustworthy messenger and deceptive trickster. These (and many other) figures of communication aim not to solve these tensions, but to include them in one way or another in their constellations of communicative processes. Whether they complement each other or offer contradicting notions what "communication" is, we get a richer sense of its social complexity grounding when we begin to see these figures not as isolated incidents or products of their time, but as ongoing meditations on "communication" as human, social practice. That is, as practice that necessarily redefines over and over its relationship to writing, storytelling, technology, and speech, as practice that, through these various figures, recalibrates the relations between sender, receiver, message, and channel as constellation firmly embedded in human social experience.

Reading Egger's poetry, we find that these tensions define the space of poetry. It's easy to feel overwhelmed by Egger; he is challenging at every turn. The endless details his poetry bears in its visual and verbal composition, the precision with which every syllable is carefully placed on the page, the focus one needs to bring to his poetry to not feel at loss—all mark Egger's poetry as

¹⁴⁹ For more on Hermes and the messenger trope see Krämer, *Medium, Messenger, Transmission. An Approach to Media Philosophy*.

extraordinary endeavor to make visible poetry's capacity to unsettle the known and the expected. Bound by grammar, syllables, words, and definitions, the *Spielraum* of poetry that ostensibly "cannot be content" with the *Mitteilung* of language opens up the vast possibilities of constellations within them. At the heart of Egger's poetics lies the "syllable": the most basic, most fundamental unit of organizing language. To treat syllables as the linguistic material of poetry means, for Egger, a radical de-familiarization of the word as carrier of meaning, of grammar as organization of semantic content, or of definitions as fixed limitations of a signifier. Egger's poetry consistently and tirelessly pitches the "measurable" against the "blurry," testing the limits grammatical or formal restrictions, for example, impose on linguistic experience. "Ich denke," Egger says, "Wissen allein führt oft zu nichts. Es geht mir um eine semantische Wolke, die um die Silbe herum erzeugt wird im Vertrauen darauf, dass das Gemeinsame darin auszumachen sein würde."¹⁵⁰ "Knowledge" on the one hand, and the "semantic cloud" around a syllable on the other, form a curious pair. The grandeur of knowledge vis-à-vis the miniscule syllable constitute the tensions Egger's poetry calls upon—the tension between the already formulated and the blurriness of a "cloud" resisting such formulation. In his poetry, this tension is carried out by the difference between "rufen" (calling) and "nennen" (naming). It is true then that we cannot be content with the *mechanical* purpose of *Mitteilung* opposite the openness of *Spielraum*, but—just like the tension between "rufen" (calling) and "nennen" (naming)—the very feeling of discontent, the challenging tension between clarity and obscurity, allows us to see poetry as that which is able to hold and make use of this tension. Derrida writes of this tension when he reads the poetry of Celan as that which any effort of interpretation, any reading of poetry, must consider:

These three lines resist even the best translation. They come to us, moreover, at the end of a poem that, however little certainty there may be about its meaning, about all its meanings and all its possible intended meanings, it is **difficult not to think of as also referring**, according to an essential *reference*, to dates and events, to the

¹⁵⁰ Egger, "Ich will semantische Wolken erzeugen."

existence or the experience of Celan. These “things” that are not only “words”: the poet is *the only one who can bear witness to them*, but **he does not name them in the poem**. The possibility of a secret always remains open, and this reverse inexhaustible. That is more than ever so in the poetry of Celan, who **never ceased encrypting** (*sealing, unsealing*) these references.¹⁵¹ (my emphasis)

The writing and interpretation of poetry after Auschwitz and at the time Derrida wrote these lines on Celan’s poetry faced different challenges (historically, poetically) than it does when Egger reminds us of the tension between “rufen” and “nennen,” between “reference” and “secret” or “knowledge” and “cloud.” We know, however, that even within its historical context, Derrida’s statement speaks to fundamental questions of poetics, fundamental that is, not in any ontological sense of “what poetry is,” but in their always ongoing urgency to the reader to think of poetry as linguistic practice in Janich’s sense of a human cultural and social activity. I approach these questions, therefore, from the angle of their formulations via the problems of transmission and communication, and from the unique position of *Mitteilung* as term that both seems to resist the task of poetry (for Wittgenstein, and also for Egger) and at the same time concretizes the tension between the separated name and the shared experience (as it does for Kierkegaard, and for Benjamin).

In what follows, I focus on “rufen” (to call) and “nennen” (to name) as such practices of language and speech (Sprache and Rede; two reoccurring concepts throughout Egger’s oeuvre) in *Nichts, das ist* (2001). *Mitteilung*, through these two distinct practices, emerges from his poetry as a poetic practice of information and device of communication revealing the informatic nature of poetry’s engagement with language and with itself. *Nichts, das ist* is a small volume of poems published in Suhrkamp 2001. The book’s composition illustrates Egger’s strategy to “blur” knowledge in favor of making visible the semantic cloud that produces, slowly, familiarity and

¹⁵¹ Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question*, 67. “What counts, then, is not that the poem *names* some motifs we know in advance must be at the heart of a reflection on responsibility, bearing witness, or poetics. What matters most is the strange limit between what can and cannot be determined or decided in *this poem’s bearing witness to bearing witness*.” Ibid., 70.

sharedness. It consists of multiple sections that are, however, not neatly separated but rather entangled and intertwined:

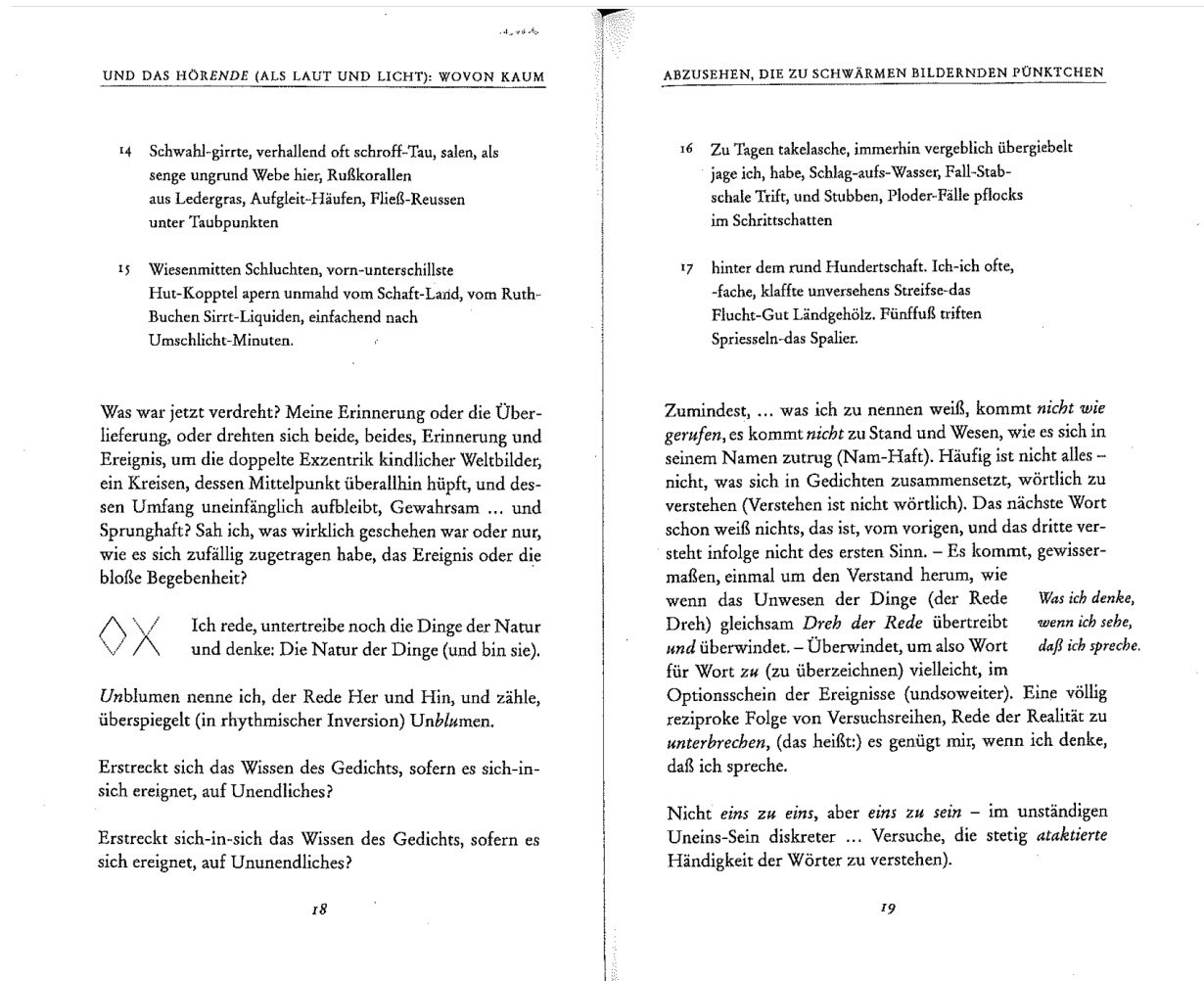


Figure 1. Oswald Egger, *Nichts, das ist*, 18-19.

The body of the poetic text itself is separated into three “threads” following from the first to the last page—one resembles a running head, one verse (with numbered stanzas), and one prose. They all meet, throughout the book, on the shared space of the page. Let me begin by looking at the “verse” section which consists of two, short, stanzas and altogether three sentences:

Zu Tagen takelasche, immerhin vergeblich übergiebelt
jage ich, habe, Schlag-aufs-Wasser, Fall-Stab-

schale Trift, und Stubben, Ploder-Fälle pflocks
im Schrittschatten

hinter dem rund Hundertschaft. Ich-ich ofte,
-fasche, klaffte unversehens Streifse-das
Flucht-Gut Ländgehölz. Fünffuß triften
Spriesseln-das Spalier.¹⁵²

The sentences seem to make sense grammatically—we recognize nouns, verbs, adverbs, prepositions, and a conjunction. We do not, however, recognize all the words as words. The poem creates a strange unfamiliarity; as if we only heard single words and muffled word-parts through a bad phone connection, or a foreign language we have just started to learn, such that when we read the poem we're left with the feeling that it somehow is on us to understand and make sense of it. We notice that the sentences get shorter in succession, with the third and last being the shortest ones. Reducing the words with each sentence draws the poem closer and closer to silence and nothingness—we imagine the sentences that would follow getting shorter and shorter until in the end there are no words left. The structure of the stanzas' syntax, followed by the short paragraph, points us 1) to its syntactical order, and 2) to succession as one of its modes.

Egger's poem carries us through its sounds, sounds that are tangled up and stringed together in the two separate stanzas. The string's knots are the many alliterations that occur almost with every word—the "ta" in "Tagen" and "takelasche," "vergeblich" and "übergiebelt," the onomatopoeic *s-* and *sch-*sounds in "Schlag-aufs-Wasser" and so on until the last sentences' alliterations in its "f" and "sp" sounds. But, more than a succession of words, the poem shifts our focus to find a thread in the words' letters, syllables, and sounds.

The stanzas are followed by a short paragraph. At first, we do not know whether it complements or explains. This relation between the two stanzas and the subsequent paragraph, another form of succession, seems to offer us the promise of unlocking the stanza's phonetic

¹⁵² Egger, *Nichts, das ist*, 19.

strangeness and unfamiliarity, the promise of telling us what the poem is about. There's hope in the promise of an ordered, and sequential structure within or along which meaning will finally unfold.

The third sentence of the “prose” paragraph tells us to follow this thread, and not the words:

“already the next word knows nothing, that is, in the one before, and the third consequently not the sense of the first.” Sense is not a consequence of the words, and understanding is not literal, the paragraph further tells us—against all hopes we may have had reading the verse, here, organization and succession are completely undermined. And almost like a justification, the paragraph’s first word “zumindest” (at least) echoes a resigning tone of an unsuccessful attempt of “aboutness,” and at the same time it utters an invitation to go back to the stanzas and test the limits of “zumindest,” of that first familiarity seemingly offered by the organization on the page.

How, then, do the syllables, create familiarity and sharedness? We find it not by looking for the “about” (or, Kierkegaard would say the “what”), but how the poem creates “sense.” We find it through the consistent alliterations creating a synesthetic experience of drifting or floating, perhaps in a small sailboat at sea. The only familiar verb in the first sentence is “jage” with the pronoun “ich”; to chase or hunt—a fast motion, a breathless running after something, here, the exhausting and demanding steering of a boat in the stormy sea that we are experiencing and following alongside the lyric “ich.” Part of the synesthetic experience is that we can’t quite pin down the meaning of all these words (“Stab,” “Stubben,” “pflocks,” “Spriesseln,” “Spalier”), and that we get the sense of what they mean and are through sound. The sounds and images, then, emerge from the poem’s tension between sense and meaning (between “Sinn” and “Sinn” in German, which collapse in the homonym).

“Zumindest” is followed by a comma and an ellipsis, before it continues with “was ich zu nennen weiß, kommt *nicht wie gerufen*”—what I know how to name, doesn’t come from being called. Here, let’s look at the relationship between “name” and “sound,” between “nennen” and “rufen.”

The German “kommt nicht wie gerufen” emphasizes a particular moment: something “comes as it is being called” also means that something arrives at just the perfect moment or time. We can experience or refer to such a moment either as fate, coincidence, or as everything in its right place; a moment of relief and “perfect sense.” We experience time and event as perfectly aligned *as if* we had called for it to happen in exactly that way. The first sentence continues with a reference to the *being* as distinct and separate from its name: “es kommt *nicht* zu Stand und Wesen, wie es sich seinem Namen zutrug (Nam-Haft).” An object’s *Wesen* is not held in its name, and by naming it its sense escapes us.¹⁵³ The disjunction between the moment of naming and the moment of understanding reflect exactly the familiar dilemma of *Mitteilung*. Egger, too, tell us that there’s never the moment when we can have both, despite our constant attempt to get from the “zumindest” somewhere where we have control over that very moment.

The parenthesis of the sentence underlines our dilemma to have to name. “Nam-Haft” turns our longing for words into an imprisonment in language (haft=arrest). If we keep relying on words and names and seek to “attach” *Wesen* to it, we find ourselves in a never-ending hunt for the sense that escapes us. But at the same time, we built our own prison in language, and the slipping illusion of our control over words is a result of our construction. “Häufig ist nicht alles – nicht, was sich in Gedichten zusammensetzt, wörtlich zu verstehen (Verstehen ist nicht wörtlich).” “Often,” but not always, a poem’s meaning does not come from its words—the poem never completely lets go of what at the same time it aims to undermine. Unlike a pure sound poem for example, Egger’s stanzas still offer a structure through names, grammar, and syntax. The “Nam-Haft” is, then, both a curse and dependence, something we have to rely on, for otherwise there would only be loose sounds without language, without understanding at all, a decision between abyss and surface that would mean the end of language altogether.

¹⁵³ Here, remember Benjamin’s distinction between “Sprach-Wesen” and “Wesen.”

This is the task of the *Mitteilung*. Poetic language can put together (“zusammensetzen”) a string or thread that will let us test the distance between “was wir zu nennen wissen” and “was wie gerufen kommt”—between what we can name and what we can’t. The relation between word and sense emerges from our “making sense,” from reading, hearing, and experiencing what they lay bare in front of us; the words themselves don’t know or understand. But we have to both give up and always attempt to find sense between a prosthetic “nennen” and a prophetic “rufen,” between what we already grasp on the one hand and what we reach for on the other. In Egger, *Mitteilung* begins as a poetic concern, even when poetry finds itself in opposition to it (an opposition marked by “knowledge” versus the “semantic cloud”). But reading Egger’s poetry, we find that he does not only thematize *Mitteilung*, but that he puts *Mitteilung* into practice by calling to our attention the tension at play between rufen and nennen. Calling and naming: the calling that has to solicit a response; the naming that “arrests” meaning and presents us with its object.

And this practice opens up a larger question: on the page, this tension is *also* visible by the visual pairing of genre. The verse altogether represents “calling”—this is the Spielraum of poetry: there are few names; the sounds, produced by the constellations of syllables, words, grammar, definitions, calls for the vast possibilities of worlds beyond them. The prose section underneath, on the other hand, attends to the urge to “name,” the urge to explain. But how does one name, how does one “explain”? Even explanation, Egger’s book of poetry suggests, cannot happen without “calling,” without recalling what one seeks to explain, without the hope that someone will hear it.¹⁵⁴

Or to put it in more general terms: the verse and the paragraph section illustrate the difference between the apostrophic and the descriptive, between one could say, two different modes of *Mitteilung* that poetry engages in. *Mitteilung* is much more important for Egger than his quote

¹⁵⁴ Think about how Satire or adaptations, for example, or intertextuality more widely, seek to “explain” at the same time as it masks explanation with “calling.”

suggests; that in Egger's poetry we see how the full complexity of *Mitteilung* reverberates through his poetic practice even if—or maybe because—he is not content with it.

How does this help to understand poetry, and understand the informatics of poetry? The opposition between information and poetry does not sufficiently describe the practices poetry engages in. Poetry practices *Mitteilung*—that is, this fuller sense of *Mitteilung*—in that it practices *both* notions of *Mitteilung* I have talked about in this chapter. Which is to say: to call *Mitteilung* a poetic practice cannot end with recognizing only one function of it and thereby falling into the trap of reinscribing the information-poetry binary, but means to recognize the full potential of *Mitteilung* as it enfolds with the poetic. It may be tempting, at least for humanists, to resolve *Mitteilung's* inherent tensions between the “raw” and calculable separation and the “cooked” and unifying “common” and “shared” notions of *Mitteilung*. But it would be a mistake, and I argue would produce only symptomatic interpretations of poetry, were we to reinforce a binary that allows us to treat poetry as a practice separate from information. Neither our understanding of poetry nor our uses of information benefits from imposing a simple binary on our uses of language, the tasks of communication, or the challenges of shifting media landscapes. At the root of *Mitteilung* lies “separation” rather than “sharing” or “commonality,” yes, but even poetry written in opposition to this dominant definition of *Mitteilung*, like Egger's syllabic poems, returns, in the end, to this separation that is in fact a with-separation. Only through and not despite separation is language possible, as Benjamin writes in his early essay. It is not then, the task of poetry (or the task for humanists) to overcome this separation in favor of commonality. It is to enter the emerging *Spielraum* of infinite plausibility, to see it as the condition for sharing at all. Poetry, Egger has shown, *does* play the language-game of information. Which is to say: any separation between poetry and information ignores the tension that allows for their separation in first place. But why succumb to such separation? Through Kierkegaard, Benjamin, and Egger, *Mitteilung* as a concept reminds us that

the history of information concepts extends well beyond the immediate historicism of its so-called age, and gives us resources with which to think the nature of our shared moment. And to recognize that, despite all efforts to separate poetry from it, it is right there in the middle.

Chapter 3, Organization : Form

1. Grammar as Form

To complete the “information triangle,” this chapter turns to its third aspect: the *organization* of information. Like *storage* and *transmission* in the first two chapters, *organization* corresponds to a “poetic” counterpart, or, indeed, many counterparts. The organization of poetic verse offers many venues which one could treat as corollaries to forms of organizing information, including meter, length, poetic forms, rhythm, the material substrate of a poetic work, or the scene of its performance. Here, however, I focus on a concept that corresponds to the versatility of *organization* in a broad sense: the idea of *form* ordering poetic composition and expression. Information in its modern use demands a great deal of organization for otherwise it cannot be stored, transmitted, or understood. For Shannon and Weaver, the process of communication is defined by entropy, a logarithmic measure of information; it is therefore a “situation [that] is highly organized, it is not characterized by a large degree of randomness or of choice.”¹⁵⁵ It is not difficult to agree that such a definition of information as form-independent content communicated by a particular sequence has very little to do with meaning or the social practice of human communication (which even Shannon and Wiener recognized). But what’s more, it betrays in many ways the concept’s own history, as John Durham Peters has shown. “In the scenes of its childhood,” Peters writes, “*information* had to do...with the active shaping of the world and with the conferral of form on matter.”¹⁵⁶ For hundreds of years before its transformation into the modern concept of information, Peters shows, the notion of information had to do mainly with concepts that we today might think of as primarily organizational: the idea of being formed, of being in-formed, of the passage from one form of organization to another, as in the stamping of a coin by a die, or the impression placed upon the

¹⁵⁵ Shannon and Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*, 103.

¹⁵⁶ Peters, “Information,” 12.

mind by an idea. The later, paradoxical detachment of information from form, during which “information” comes to mean “fact” or “morselized piece of medium-neutral content,” as it does for us today, represents, Peters writes, “a massive” historical “inversion in the meaning of *information*.”¹⁵⁷

It is to the terrain prior to that historical inversion, and to the formal and organizational relations of language, to which this dissertation now turns. Its protagonist is the eighteenth century German writer Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock, whose “grammatical poetics” and revolutionary attention to the “word” as main metrical unit of German verse oriented the organization of poetic form towards sound. Born in 1724, Klopstock grew up in a pietistic family, receiving a rigorous humanistic education at the famous *Schulpforta* in Saxony-Anhalt, where he studied classical Greek and Latin literature. He later became a student of theology in Jena and Leipzig, and soon published the first parts of his magnum opus, *Der Messias*, an epic poem inspired by Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (he completed the poem decades later, in 1773). Consisting of almost 20,000 lines—about 7,000 more than Homer’s *Odyssey*—*Der Messias* is the first work in German composed entirely in dactylic hexameter. It thus marks a major shift in German poetry, both for its “rejection of the alternating verse forms that had dominated German poetry since Opitz in favor of the hexameter” and for its combination of classical Greek meter with the emotive, suggestive expression of a sentimental interiority, typical of the *Empfindsamkeit*.¹⁵⁸ In addition to *Der Messias*, Klopstock wrote six plays (including *Hermanns Schlacht*, 1769) as well as classical odes and elegies committed to the experimental combination of classical hexameter and German language. Klopstock’s devotion to the urgent reinvention of German poetics led him to publish a number of essays and theoretical writings on poetry and poetics, in which he treated the concern with poetic form in the context of German language, culture, and history; these include *Die deutsche Gelehrtenrepublik* (1774), *Über die Sprache und*

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Kohl, “Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock,” 2000, 600.

Dichtkunst (1779-80), and *Grammatische Gespräche* (1794). A “national poet,” Klopstock never ceased to be deeply invested in formulating and defining “Germanness” as its own cultural, literary, and historical identity. As a poet and a contributor to the theoretical, poetic discourse of his time, Klopstock has enjoyed much critical acclaim and the status of a central figure in German canon.¹⁵⁹

To understand German poetic language in the qualitative terms of sound and rhythm rather than to continue the application of the Greek and Latin quantitative meter was, for Klopstock, not only a project defining the “Germanness” of poetry, but more importantly, an exercise in thinking poetry’s organizational capacities, an exercise, that is, in composing the structures which produce a poem’s sense and meaning. The basic argument of this chapter is that this kind of organizational thinking belongs to a more general history of human informational practice. Informational practices, we know, involve the storage, transmission, and organization of “content”; they are socially defined and reified in living activity that reinforces distinctions between form (in-formare, Latin) and content, between the Greek *hyle* and the image (as in Husserl’s analysis of the Dürer woodcut), and, finally, between the poetic functions of language—the parts of language that do not “inform” but have functions defined partly in relation to the absence of or indifference to information—and its informative ones.

It is this poetic/informational aspect of form and of grammar in particular that focuses my attention here. “Zu sterben/das ist Grammatik!”, writes Ernst Meister in 1927, alluding to the poetic tension between the grammatical infinitive of the word “zu sterben” and the reality of death as human experience.¹⁶⁰ Grammar and poetry, Meister tells us, are both forever distant in their immediate tasks and indefinitely entangled. Paul de Man, reading Baudelaire, writes that “what we call the lyric, the instance of represented voice, conveniently spells out the rhetorical and thematic

¹⁵⁹ It is difficult to resist swooning along with Werther and Lotte, when Goethe has them watch the beginning of a storm outside their window, sharing their own storm of feelings in the utterance of a single word, “Klopstock!” (*Die Leiden des Jungen Werther*, Erstes Buch). For recent developments in the study of Klopstock regarding his status within German literary history, see

¹⁶⁰ Meister, *Gedichte: 1969-1979. Textkritische Und Kommentierte Ausgabe*, 97.

characteristics that make it the paradigm of a complementary relationship between grammar, trope, and theme.”¹⁶¹ Roman Jakobson writes that “there is...a remarkable analogy between the role of grammar in poetry and the painter’s composition, based on a latent or patent geometrical order or on a revulsion against geometrical arrangements.”¹⁶² Poetry’s relation to grammar as mode of organization is not only instrumental, but troublesome: we recognize in poetry the necessity to “order” and “arrange” language, but we also ask a poem to revolt against it. Meister’s poem, De Man’s paradigm, and Jakobson’s analogy all prepare us to think “grammar” as a concept that include both “poetic” and “informatic” aspects.

For Klopstock, the German language demands a particular way of organizing the structures that allow poetry to fully activate these poetic/informational aspects: the “reorganization” of verse according to sound rather than stress. Establishing a “Grammatik des Wortes” and a “poetry of the syntagma” (Winfried Menninghaus) to bridge the gap between quality and quantity, between whatever one may call “poetic” and “informational,” Klopstock develops the concept of *Mitausdruck*—the simultaneous expression of measure (Wortmaß) and sound (Wohlklang) that gives poetry its soul. In Klopstock’s writings in *Die deutsche Gelehrtenrepublik* (1774) and *Grammatische Gespräche* (1794), as well as his lyrical poems, *Mitausdruck* emerges as a theoretical concept addressing poetry as well as a poetic figure in its own right. The goals of this chapter are, then, (1) to offer the figure of *Mitausdruck* as a way to treat information as a matter of practice, as well as a figure of theoretical and social concern (in Peter Janich’s work on the history of information in science), and so to show how Klopstock’s linguistic work contributes to a larger understanding of the practices governing information, and (2) to propose that thinking about that longer history of informational practices gives us a new angle from which to understand the importance of, and the differences made by, Klopstock’s work.

¹⁶¹ De Man, “Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric,” 303.

¹⁶² Jakobson, “Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry,” 43.

II. Klopstock's Poetic Vocabulary

In *Mitausdruck* Klopstock merges various tasks of poetry to build a systematic approach to the composition of German verse. The goal of this poetological project is, first and foremost, to redefine—or rather, to define for the first time—the particularity of the German language and its poetic capacities. That particularity, Klopstock argues, could only come from the German language itself, from turning to German in all its linguistic, grammatical, and expressive uniqueness, rather than borrowing from the poetic and linguistic traditions of the long dominant Greek and Latin language or French prosody. About Klopstock's invention of *Mitausdruck* as crucial to such a project, Steffen Martus writes:

Nur so viel zur Erinnerung: In unterschiedlichen Akzentuierungen versucht Klopstock im Laufe der Entwicklung seiner Poetologie die Ausdrucksfähigkeit der Sprache zu steigern, indem er erstens der Wortstellung, zweitens der klanglichen ("Wohlklang"), drittens der dynamischen ("Tonverhalt") sowie viertens der temporalen Dimension von Sprache ("Zeitausdruck") die Fähigkeit zum "Mitausdruck" zuspricht; dabei bezieht er fünftens die konnotative Dimension der Sprache in besonderer Weise in die Überlegungen ein.¹⁶³

Identifying *Mitausdruck* as central to the development of Klopstock's "poetology," Martus vaguely describes the term as a "capacity" Klopstock attributes to various dimensions of language (sound, word order, or the expression of time).¹⁶⁴ In search of clear definition of *Mitausdruck*, we find in Grimm's dictionary only one entry for *Mitausdruck*: "leiserer, lauterer mitausdruck der gedanken des liedes sei die bewegung des verses." This definition—the only definition of *Mitausdruck* available in

¹⁶³ Martus, *Werkpolitik. Zur Literaturgeschichte kritischer Kommunikation vom 17. bis ins 20. Jahrhundert mit Studien zu Klopstock, Tieck, Goethe und George*, 298. "As a reminder: in various degrees of emphasis throughout the development of his poetology Klopstock aims to increase the expressiveness of language. First, through word order, second through sound, third through the dynamic relation between tones, and fourth through the temporal dimension of language, all of which have the capacity of 'Mitausdruck'; and fifth, in relation to this capacity he includes the connotative dimension of language in particular."

¹⁶⁴ I want to add here that I use "poetology" in quotation marks in these sections, because it represents a *décalage* between German and English criticism. While in English, "poetology" has very little currency in the study of poetry, German criticism speaks of "poetology" as the self-conception of a poet, that is, as a poetics that emerges from or is postulated within the work of the poet or by the poet herself. On "Inszenierte Poetik" and a brief account "poetological" readings and useful list of references, see Brandmeyer, "Inszenierte Poetik."

any German dictionary—originates from one of Klopstock's epigrams, written sometime between 1795 and 1803. The whole epigram reads as follows:

Leiserer, lauterer Mitausdruck der Gedanken des Liedes
Sey die Bewegung des Verses. So oft er diesem Gesez nicht
Treu und hold ist, gehet er nur, um zu gehn; und verirrter
Tritt er einher, wenn er gar anwandert gegen den Inhalt.
Doch stets treuen gehorsam verbieten nicht wenige Worte,
Und die Stellungen, welche der Sinn, und die Leidenschaft ordnen,
Auch Gedanken, die dem Verein mit Bewegung sich weigern.
Deutsche, strebet, ihr könts, nach dem Kranze der seltensten Untreu.¹⁶⁵

The epigram confronts us with multiple sets of oppositions underlying Klopstock's term. Silence and clamor, confusion and obedience, ordering and resistance to order, arrangement and passion, thought and verse face each other throughout the stanza. *Mitausdruck* governs the movement between them, the movement that carries the tensions of the opposites. Through this tension, the epigram emerges as fierce plea: "Deutsche, strebet, ihr könts, nach dem Kranze der seltensten Untreu." This last line of the stanza calls for the revolutionary refusal of lethargic fidelity, and for the pursuit of the "rarest infidelity." But earlier in the stanza, in in the second and third line, we read a warning that calls for observing the rules: "So oft er diesem Gesez nicht/Treu und hold ist, gehet er nur, um zu gehen." Here, to not follow and respect the law leads to confusion and to a meaningless "walking for the sake of walking." How, then, are we to understand this plea?

Let's return to the first line and "quieter, louder *Mitausdruck*," which allows us to separate the first four from the last four lines of the epigram. The first "fidelity" is that of recognizing the oppositional forces of *Mitausdruck*. The "movement" of verse represents in this sense a scale, whose

¹⁶⁵ Klopstock, *Epigramme*, 54.

"Quieter, louder with-expression of a song's thought
Is the movement of verse. As often as he does not
Follow the rules he only walks for the sake of walking; and
More confused he steps forward, when he revolts against the content.
But not only a few words prohibit loyal obedience,
And the positions, ordered by sense and passion,
As well as thoughts, which refuse such union by movement.
Germans, pursue, you can, the wreath of rare disloyalty."

balance should not be tipped over, neither in the direction of “walking for the sake of walking” nor of giving more weight to content (“anwandert gegen den Inhalt”). The force of *Mitausdruck* lies in the capacity to hold this balance and to the movement between thought and verse. To say it in a different way, *Mitausdruck* is the poetic balance between content and form, neither of which holds power of its own without the other. Herein lies what Martus calls Klopstock’s “Poetologie”: the development of a German poetics that is able to hold this balance precisely because it is built on the “natural” linguistic capacities of the German language and not on an artificial (that is, non-German) law imposed on its system. The second half of the epigram, then, calls for more “infidelity,” because it is a plea for change and a plea for recalibrating the balance between the oppositional pairs evoked in these lines.

Klopstock’s grammatical project of reformulating how versification can create “movement,” the productive tension between meter, sound, and meaning, was on its surface highly pragmatic. “Für Klopstock selbst,” Katrin Kohl writes, “kam die Gefahr von anderer Seite: Seine Grammatik ist ein Werk der Opposition gegen die wachsende Autorität Johann Christoph Adelungs auf den Gebieten der Wortkunde, Grammatik, Stilistik, und Orthographie.”¹⁶⁶ His initial intention was to “plan a grammar for the practical use and to even publish an affordable school edition.”¹⁶⁷ Indeed, to regard Klopstock as a “Grammatiker” one needs to look at both his didactic or theoretical writings and his own practice as poet. To begin with the epigram that provided Grimm’s dictionary with its definition of *Mitausdruck* spans in some sense the arc between Klopstock’s theory and his poetry this chapter focuses on. We find in its eight lines traces of both Klopstock’s political urgency to build a unified German language and linguistic practice and his poetic sensibility towards language as the material of thought. When in 1797 August Wilhelm Schlegel writes that “Klopstock ist ein grammatischer Poet, und ein poetischer Grammatiker,” he forms a chiasmus that we can borrow as

¹⁶⁶ Kohl, *Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock*, 2000, 122.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

figure for what Klopstock aims to achieve with his “grammatical poetics” and his formulation of *Mitausdruck*: the articulation of a balance that both reaffirms and inverts its organizational order.¹⁶⁸

That *Mitausdruck* was, however, first and foremost a poetic concern, becomes clear when we look at the first epigram collected under the title “Der doppelte Mitausdruck” and of which “Leiserer, lauterer Mitausdruck” is the last. There, Klopstock writes:

Silbenmaß, ich weiche dir nicht, behaupte mich, ziehe
Dir mich vor! “Wohlklang, ich liebe das Streiten nicht. Besser
Horchen wir jeder mit wachem Ohr dem Gesetz’, und vereinen
Fest uns. Wir sind als dann die zweyte Seele der Sprache.”¹⁶⁹

The short stanza presents us with a dialogue between “Silbenmaß” and “Wohlklang,” between meter and melodiousness or sound. Their dialogue introduces a dispute, beginning with “melody” belligerently defending itself against the firmness of “meter” in the first to the second line. As in the later epigram, we find in this line a vocabulary of resistance. The refusal to make way for “meter,” the insistence on the preference for “melody” and defense of its importance all mark the pugnaciousness of what sounds like the challenge to a duel. But the next three lines offer a more peaceful solution to the “en garde” that opens the stanza. “I do not love to dispute,” “meter” responds to “melody.” Rather than to battle for preeminence, “meter” suggests to both be wary of the rules and face them as a united poetic force. Here, again, the aim is the articulation and calibration of balance; it is not for “meter” and “melody” to defy the rules, but to form a “second soul” of language. The sentimental and comedic dispute between “Silbenmaß” and “Wohlklang” imagines *Mitausdruck* as figure that bridges the gap between the measured and the aural, regarding them only in their union as soul.

¹⁶⁸ Behler, *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe. Charakteristiken und Kritiken I. 1796 - 1801*, 2:186.

¹⁶⁹ Klopstock, *Epigramme*, 54.

“Meter, I will not yield, I hold my ground, chose
Myself over you! ‘Melody, I don’t love arguing. Better
We both listen with open ear to the rules, and unite.
We are then the second soul of language.”

This epigrammatic dispute is a remarkable expression of the difficulties of balancing “meter” and “melody,” and of treating them as *equally* poetic. About one hundred years before Wilhelm Windelband would formulate his distinction between the natural sciences and the humanities, between the nomothetic (the observation of general laws) and the ideographic (the individual and particular event), preparing the ground for the manifestation of their (seemingly) inherent differences, we find in Klopstock the foreshadowing of the struggle to balance the general law and the particular expression. Klopstock aimed to treat them as poetic equals, seeing their combination as offering the firmest foundation since it activates all levels of language, from the rules that make up what is “German” about German to the particular sounds and meanings that distinguishes the language from other languages, traditions, and histories.

The first important observation about *Mitausdruck* so far is, then, that the term describes an equilibrium between measure and sense, between the laws and regulations that guide the composition of a poem and the emotions and sensation a poem invokes. Such an equilibrium is not achieved by a stalemate (one solution to the dispute between “Silbenmaß” and “Wohlklang”), but by the recognition of their mutually beneficial relation. “Meter” and “melody” are not only separate, parallel entities, but emerge fully only through their mutuality. In the poem, their dispute illustrates a conscious decision to join forces, to form an alliance that would offer a crucial advantage over the hitherto divided state. The union is, in this sense, not a nostalgic longing for returning to a natural harmony or a finding of a soul that has been lost. It is, and this is crucial to Klopstock, a project for the future, an awareness that if there is “German” poetry, it has to be written from a position of consciousness of the German language, and in accordance with the Greek, Latin, and French poetic legacies and traditions of the past. Secondly, *Mitausdruck* is both a political and a linguistic endeavor. Klopstock’s attention to linguistic expression, syntax, sound, connotation, and to language’s spatial and temporal capacities shows a profound interest in the inner workings of language and its ways of

organizing human communication. From the combination of this politics and this linguistic thought emerges an overall aesthetic theory. Klopstock's aesthetic, "poetological" theory offers many angles from which we may aim to understand it, though none can claim to be complete without understanding *Mitausdruck* as Klopstock's strategy for bridging the gap between politics and aesthetics, between practices of daily life and historical legacies. *Mitausdruck* is, thus, from its beginning the figure of a "double": both as it emerges from the union between "meter" and "melody," and as it embodies his programmatic political and aesthetic motivation of reinventing a German poetics.

Klopstock's vision of a "double" figure involves at the same time sharing and separation. Not unlike *Mitteilung*, the concept of *Mitausdruck* makes full use of the contradictory forces grounding the term. As a noun and by itself, *Mitausdruck* functions as a tool for describing a specific poetic effect or as a name for a poem's balance between measure and sound. *Mitausdruck*, Klopstock writes, is "the movement of verse." For Klopstock, much (if not all) of what makes the art of poetry emerges from "movement," an umbrella term he uses to describe various relations within a poem's composition. In *Vom deutschen Hexameter* (1779), Klopstock's main treatise on poetic meter, he focuses on "Wortbewegung" (the movement of words) as an essential feature of verse as an art.¹⁷⁰ *Mitausdruck*, then, has to be understood in terms of "movement," of poetry's use of language to create relations between sounds, syllables, words, and meanings that produce an overall—and specifically poetic—effect. Such an effect is not simply a matter of expression (*Ausdruck*), but of with-expression (*Mitausdruck*); while language is concerned with *Ausdruck*, poetry must to go beyond expression and to produce *Mitausdruck*. "Die Sprache," Klopstock writes in *Grammatische Gespräche* (1794), "hat fünferley Ausdruck: Den der Worte, als angenommener *Gedankenzeichen*, den ihrer

¹⁷⁰ "Sie ist die Hauptsache, worauf es in der Verskunst ankommt," Klopstock, "Vom deutschen Hexameter," 128.

umendenden und umbildenden *Veränderungen*, und den, welcher in der *Stellung* liegt; ferner den des *Wohlklangs*, und des *Sylbenmaßes*” (my emphases).¹⁷¹

A few pages ago, I mentioned Steffen Martus’ helpful summary of Klopstock’s poetological ambition. There, Martus emphasizes the poet’s investment in heightening or increasing language’s expressiveness (“Ausdrucksfähigkeit”) by paying specific attention to 1) word order, 2) sound, 3) the dynamic dimension (or relation between sounds), and 4) the temporal dimension of language (or the expression of time). These four categories *each* have the “capacity” of *Mitausdruck*, Martus writes, but the site that seems most receptive to *Mitausdruck* is 5) language’s connotative dimension.¹⁷² So far, the five categories identified by Martus correspond with the five expressions (“fünferley Ausdruck”) Klopstock attributes to the expressiveness of language in *Grammatische Gespräche*:

“Worte als Gedankenzeichen”	connotative dimensions
“Veränderungen der Worte”	temporal dimensions
“Stellung”	word order
“Wohlklang”	sound
“Sylbenmaß”	dynamic dimensions

This correspondence between Klopstock’s terms and Martus’s explanations reveals two significant dimensions of Klopstockian poetics. First, it points us to the encyclopedic system Klopstock developed as part of his theoretical writing, and second, that it prompts us to confront the simultaneous clarity of these terms and the confusion that arises from a closer look at Klopstock’s poetic project and “poetological” development. Klopstock was both a poet and a theoretician of poetry. To read Klopstock requires oscillating between his theoretical writings, where we gain a deeper understand of his poems, and his poetry, when we search for practical examples of his attempt to revolutionize the composition of German verse. “Klopstock lesen,” Winfried

¹⁷¹ Klopstock, *Grammatische Gespräche*, 298. This appears in the second part of the “Grammatische Gespräche.”

¹⁷² Martus, *Werkpolitik. Zur Literaturgeschichte kritischer Kommunikation vom 17. bis ins 20. Jahrhundert mit Studien zu Klopstock, Tieck, Goethe und George*, 298.

Menninghaus writes, “heißt also seit je: ihn mit ihm gegen ihn lessen.”¹⁷³ In the two epigrams earlier in this chapter, we have seen glimpses of such oscillation: the epigrams are not only poems, but poems explicitly about the theoretical concepts Klopstock aims to introduce into German poetics. Ideas like “Wohlklang” and “Sylbenmaß” appear and reappear in Klopstock’s poems, dialogues, and theoretical writings. In the grand picture of his poetics, they establish an encyclopedic system of terms and concepts designed to shift the discussion of poetics into a new terminological and historical realm—for how would one create a “German” poetics without using terms that originate from the language providing the linguistic material for poetry? For this purpose, Klopstock develops an idiosyncratic vocabulary of poetic terms, a vocabulary that involves the neologisms *Mitausdruck* and *Wortfuß*.¹⁷⁴ The idiosyncrasy of his vocabulary is one feature of Klopstock’s dictionary, but the idiosyncrasy of the system as a whole arises through the meanings that emerge from new relations between established terms and concepts. Contrasting Martus’s summary with Klopstock’s assessment of the “five expressions of language” emphasizes Klopstock’s programmatic terminology, and shows how much of its force arises from the relation among them. It is through that relation that these five terms bring us closer to what Klopstock had in mind when he developed his encyclopedic repertoire. “Wohlklang” (sound) and “Sylbenmaß” (the dynamic relation between sounds) unfold their whole potential only because of the effect these two properties achieve together when they reach a harmonic balance. To recognize the idiosyncratic features of Klopstock’s poetic terms allows us to see something that is specifically *Klopstockian* about his poetic endeavor.

This brings me to a second point. Any systematic approach can be both isolating and invigorating. One of the dangers of treating Klopstock’s vocabulary as an idiosyncratic system is to situate Klopstock too firmly within one (or another) historical framework. “Wenn die Rolle

¹⁷³ Menninghaus, “Klopstocks Poetik der schnellen ‘Bewegung,’” 259.

¹⁷⁴ In 2007, Martin Endres and Roland Reuß initiated a website solely dedicated to Klopstock’s “aesthetic termini,” the “Metrik-Wörterbuch zu Klopstock.” See Endres and Reuß, “Metrik-Wörterbuch zu Klopstock.”

Klopstocks innerhalb der Literaturgeschichte grob gesehen konstant geblieben ist,” Katrin Kohl writes, “so scheint dies allem mit den geschichtlichen Modellen zusammenzuhängen, durch die seine Rolle definiert wird.”¹⁷⁵ While recognizing the idiosyncrasy of Klopstock’s poetics helps us construct his interwoven poetic and theoretical ambitions, the clarity that arises from this particular reading comes with blurring the lines elsewhere—whether to reevaluate historical continuity, periodization, or literary history. This is where Martus’s assessment is helpful: by emphasizing the particularity of Klopstock’s own vocabulary as a system, Martus establishes similarities and correspondences between Klopstock’s terms and a vocabulary of our time. “Veränderung der Worte” is not exactly the same as the “temporal dimension of language,” “Wohlklang” not the same as “dynamic dimension,” or “Mitausdruck” as “connotative dimension.” And yet, translating or reformulating these concepts offers a reading of Klopstock as a thinker who has much to contribute to how we think about poetry and language today. Within the scope of this chapter, my own approach to what earlier I described as “Klopstock’s dictionary” aims to treat these concepts as practices rather than definitions in the strict sense. In this way, Klopstock’s systematic method becomes a model for how practices are shaped by their historical embeddedness and urgency, even as they become a repertoire for resisting historical isolationism.

Even on a much smaller scale, that is, on the level of the terms themselves, we are tempted to clearly isolate their meanings. To the five terms discussed above, Martus adds a sixth, *Mannigfaltigkeit* (multiplicity or plurality), a term Klopstock occasionally uses to illustrate the vivacity inherent in German language once freed from the uniform and monotonous Greek (iambic) meter and the poetic advantage of prioritizing the natural sound of German words over the “acuteness” of syllable-based Greek meter.¹⁷⁶ *Mannigfaltigkeit* aims to show that “poetic harmony” in German verse

¹⁷⁵ Kohl, *Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock*, 2000, 6.

¹⁷⁶ See Klopstock, “Vom deutschen Hexameter,” 120ff; Klopstock, “Von der Nachahmung des griechischen Sylbenmaßes im Deutschen,” 10, 13.

has to be achieved by means that are different from those of its Greek predecessors. For harmony in German poetry, Klopstock writes, does not arise from its being confined to a meter that enhances the beauty and possibilities of a language so different from German. Klopstock explains this, for example, on the basis of how a dactyl works:

Zum Beweise dessen wähle ich vorzüglich den Daktylus, weil er hinter der langen Sylbe zwei kurze hat. Da unsre kurze Sylbe auf zwei Arten, und bisweilen auch auf die dritte, kurz ist; der Griechen ihre hingegen nur auf Eine und selten auf zwei Arten: so entstehen daher so verschiedene Daktylen, und zugleich so viel Mannigfaltigkeit mehr, daß diese in Einem Perioden die Harmonie schon ungemein erhöht.¹⁷⁷

Rather than understanding—and applying—a dactyl strictly in terms of the weight of its syllables (long, short, short), Klopstock counters that German syllables possess multiple ways of being “short.” Hence, a dactyl is not always the same dactyl, which is why German verse ought to shift its metric priority from a uniform syllable weight to the multiplicity of different sounds that all still “fit” a dactyl. The German language, therefore, allows for “so viel Mannigfaltigkeit mehr,” for “so much more multiplicity” when it comes to poetic meter. *Mannigfaltigkeit* is a beautifully vague and general term for the specific point Klopstock makes here. General, also, in that it does not first and foremost suggest a specific structure, but rather indicates the “avoidance of restrictive structures like rhyme and alternation.”¹⁷⁸ The term is, in this way, a “negative” structure or a site of resistance to a certain structure (like that of the Greek dactyl). The example of *Mannigfaltigkeit* illustrates some of the most productive complications inherent in Klopstock’s terminology: the places where contradicting forces produce the groundwork for poetic practices beyond their immediate significance.

¹⁷⁷ “To prove this I choose primarily the dactyl, because it consists of two long syllables followed by a short one. Because our short syllable can be short in two, and sometimes even three, ways; the Greek syllable on the other hand only in one, and rarely in two, ways: and so we have multiple dactyls, and at the same time, so much multiplicity more, that it in one period can increase harmony by an incredible amount.” Klopstock, “Von der Nachahmung des griechischen Sylbenmaßes im Deutschen,” 13.

¹⁷⁸ Martus, *Werkpolitik. Zur Literaturgeschichte kritischer Kommunikation vom 17. bis ins 20. Jahrhundert mit Studien zu Klopstock, Tieck, Goethe und George*, 298.

Similarly, Klopstock never offers a clear definition of *Mitausdruck*. Both *Mannigfaltigkeit* and *Mitausdruck* illustrate, Martus writes, Klopstock's "rhetoric of blurriness" ("Rhetorik der Unschärfe").¹⁷⁹ Kohl offers no discussion of *Mitausdruck* at all, though she connects the term to "meter and rhythm."¹⁸⁰ Neither is there consensus among Klopstock scholars as to whether *Mitausdruck* means "verse or meter as opposed to content,"¹⁸¹ the "harmony of *res* and *verba*,"¹⁸² or the "primary feature of the movement of words."¹⁸³ In the scattered places where *Mitausdruck* is mentioned in the context of Klopstock's poetics, the discussion does not go beyond admissions of the term's vagueness or halts at its contradictory meanings provided by Klopstock himself. Both "laut" and "leise," loud and faint, *Mitausdruck* for Klopstock does not resolve the contradiction between the word's distinct purpose (to describe a particular effect) and its various, quiet consequences (arising from the contradiction between sound and meaning, for example).¹⁸⁴ Neither shall such contradictions be resolved here. Instead, for the rest of the chapter, I approach *Mitausdruck* as two kinds of figures, one poetic and one grammatical, in order to return, finally, to Schlegel's aphoristic assessment of Klopstock as "grammatical poet and poetical grammarian." If we begin to read *Mitausdruck* as an idea that bridges the gap between the chiasmically separated "poetry" and "grammar," we find in it a practice, which, like *Haltsamkeit* in the first and *Mitteilung* in second chapter, manages poetry's information.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ In her brief chapter "Metrum und Rhythmus als Mitausdruck," *Mitausdruck* is not mentioned a single time (80-82).

¹⁸¹ Hellmuth, *Metrische Erfindung und metrische Theorie bei Klopstock*, 265.

¹⁸² Payne, *The Epic Imaginary*, 66.

¹⁸³ Menninghaus, "Klopstocks Poetik der schnellen 'Bewegung,'" 136.

¹⁸⁴ See Klopstock, "Vom deutschen Hexameter," 100.

3. The Ear and the Eye

Why poetry? In an ode, published two years before his death in 1803, Klopstock creates a dialogue between sculpture, painting, and poetry.¹⁸⁵ In the poem, “Die Bildhauerkunst, die Malerey, und die Dichtkunst,” the personified sister arts engage in a dispute about which of them is the superior art of the three:

Die Bildhauerkunst, die Malerey, und die Dichtkunst.

M. Der Marmorbildung fehlet der Blick; und war
Vielleicht nicht seine liebste Gespielin stets
Die Seele? B. Zeige, Malerey, erst,
Was du gestaltetest, auf allen Seiten,

Eh du so hoch dich wagest, daß du dich mir
Mit Tadel nahest! Zürnet das Auge denn
Dir nicht, und weinet's nicht vor Unmut,
Daß du des Schönen so viel ihm weigerst?

D. Mit Rosen kränz' ich, farbige Zaubrin, dich,
Und dich mit Laube, parische, wie es hell
der Eich' entsproß! B. Dir nimt der Zwang nicht
Seiten Apolls, noch den Blick Minerva's.

Die ganze Schöpfung öffnet sich dir zur Wahl,
Vor der dich selten warnet der Schönheit Wink.
Wir ruhn: du wallest, schwebest, fliegest
Fort mit der Zeit, die kein Säumen kennt.

M. Wie Melodien hallet dem Ohre zu,
Was du dem Geiste schufest. Es wandelt stets;
Und würde, wenn es weilt', und stände,
Weniger Glut in das Herz ergießen.

B. Mit Eichenlaube wollen wir, Dichtung, dich,
Und Rosen kränzen! M. Aber ach unser Kranz
Verwelkt, wenn wir nicht, deiner würdig,
Bilden das Lebendste, das du sangest.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁵ An interpretation of the poem can be found in Düntzer, *Erläuterungen zu den Deutschen Klassikern*, 372–75.

¹⁸⁶ Klopstock, *Oden*, 1:590.

The poem begins with two stanzas depicting a quarrel between Sculpture and Painting: While Sculpture is accused of “lacking vision,” painting is called out for its lack of dimensionality, unable to depict objects “from all sides” and, despite possessing “eyes” being unable to recognize many a beautiful sight.¹⁸⁷ The third stanza begins with a mediating objection formulated by Poetry, praising both arts equally for their artistic capabilities, Painting for its colors and Sculpture for its forms and materials. This short interlude is the only time in the poem when Poetry speaks. After hearing this praise, Sculpture and Painting—as if embarrassed by their childish argument—erupt, in return, with long and detailed laudations of all of poetry’s formidable achievements. Poetry, finally, comes forth as the winner of the dispute, not because it explicitly expresses its superiority, but because painting and sculpture realize they cannot compete.

The poem lets Sculpture and Painting (and the reader) arrive at this conclusion, first, via the form of an argument that allow Poetry to step forward as the morally superior dialogic partner of the three. While Sculpture and Painting each proclaim their best traits as reasons to win this classic competition between the arts, Poetry participates in the dispute only once and only to undermine the structure of their argument, emphasizing the beauty of the other two arts rather than its own. Poetry’s surprising rejection of self-praise at the beginning of the third stanza marks a turn of events in the poem—convinced, or maybe embarrassed, by Poetry’s selflessness and wisdom, Sculpture and Painting retreat from the competition and engage for the rest of the dispute in hyperbolic acknowledgment of Poetry’s superiority.

Their insight, achieved by the moral development of the story, is based on aesthetic judgment. After admitting its limited means of revealing “all sides of Apollo” and “Minerva’s vision,” Sculpture proceeds to note that Poetry suffers from no such limitation. Poetry can depict (*darstellen*) anything and even in its entirety (“Die ganze Schöpfung öffnet sich dir zur Wahl“). Rather

¹⁸⁷ “Blick” means sight or vision, though here, because of the pairing with “soul” in the next line, “Blick” refers also to “eyes” (the gateway to the “soul”) referring both an outwards vision.

than being confined to represent certain aspects of the world by virtue of its material or artistic means, Poetry, Sculpture says, possesses limitless capacities to capture beauty (“Vor der dich selten warnet der Schönheit Wink”). What follows are three stanzas that encapsulate Klopstock’s poetic theory of movement (*Wortbewegung*): the reason Poetry is capable of capturing beauty, Sculpture and Painting acknowledge in unison, is its unique capacity to manage sound and time. Poetry is not static nor does it rest. It surges, floats, and flies timelessly, producing beautiful melodies, which, like eternal flames, never fade.

These accolades are comments on the arts’ material media as much as they are on the nature of visual and verbal expression. Many of the metaphors in the poem evoke the temporality of physical media and materials. The “seam” of time (“säumen”), the “glow” in the heart, and the “withering” of oak and roses are all images of materials that cannot withstand the course of time, materials that are fleeting and temporary. A seam will eventually disintegrate, a glow dies down, and plants cease to flourish: as similes for the arts, the emphasis on material temporality could not be clearer. What separates Poetry from Sculpture and Painting throughout these lines is the former’s independence from tangible materiality. Neither subject to the material decay of paper, marble, or stone, nor to the temporal dimensions imposed by them, Poetry removes itself from the aesthetic quarrel about artistic superiority by defeating the *material* notion of time, temporality, and lastingness proposed by the two visual arts. Visual expression, bound to the media of sight, space, and presence, cannot manage and control time. Verbal expression, however, transcends the material limitations of visual media, for its own primary materials—words and sounds—are free from the burden of decay. The personification of the arts in Klopstock’s poem serves two distinct purposes: first, it makes use of a rhetorical device carrying out the argument the poem is about (which of the arts is the superior of the three), and second, it relates the argument of art, media, and time to the human experience of life and death. The last line summarizes this double effect of the poetic device: “Aber ach unser

Kranz/Verwelkt, wenn wir nicht, deiner würdig,/Bilden das Lebendste, das du sangest.” Time is the difference between life and death, between the withering wreath of the image and the perennial life of song.

The entire argument of similarity and difference in Klopstock’s poem has, so far, rested upon the notion of time as external condition of the arts. The poem presents sculpture and painting as similar arts owing to their material relation to time, and poetry as different from both (and either) of them by virtue of sound being its main medium. Unlike sculpture and painting, poetry is not subjected to processes of material fleetingness. For Klopstock, the question of materiality and time has, however, an internal dimension as well: the movement of and between words (*Wortbewegung*). Movement, to further the metaphor of life and death as difference between visual and verbal representation, expresses poetry’s capacity to “sing of that which is most alive,” to capture essential human experience where the static arts fail to persist. At a crucial moment of the poem, Sculpture and Painting refer to Poetry’s nature as *moving* art. Never resting, Poetry “moves with time” (“fort mit der Zeit”). But how, we may ask, does poetry formally manage time, or manages its timelessness, as an art different from the visual art of painting and sculpture?

At the heart of Klopstock’s poetics, *Wortbewegung* describes the expression of time as a consequence of metrical relations between different units. Both volume (remember “laut” and “leise” in the earlier epigram) and speed belong to the realm of relations poetic meter has to manage to the best of its ability. In *Vom deutschen Hexameter*, Klopstock uses two terms, *Zeitausdruck* (time-expression) and *Tonverhalt* (sound-relation), to define the movement of words:

Die Bewegung der Worte ist entweder langsam, oder schnell. Sie hat, von dieser Seite angesehen, *Zeitausdruck*. . . Die Bewegung der Worte muß aber auch von einer anderen Seite angesehen werden. Die Längen und Kürzen haben nämlich solche

übereinstimmende, oder abstechende Verhältnisse unter einander, daß selbst das Ohr des Unachtsamen aufmerksam darauf wird.¹⁸⁸

Poetry express time by organizing stanzas according to speed. A verse will sound slower when it consists of more long sounds, and faster when it contains more short sounds. Consider, for example, the difference between the beginning of a line like

Mit den Düften von der Linde/In den Kühlungen wehn
(○○-○, ○○-○ / ○○ -○○ -, “Die Sommernacht,” 1766)¹⁸⁹

and

Mit Graun füllt, und Ehrfurcht der Anblick, mit Entzückung/das Herz
(○-- , ○○-- , ○-- , ○○-- ,/○, “Der Vorhof und der Tempel,” 1765).¹⁹⁰

The first line, combining three short and one long sounds in “Mit den Düften”, creates the aural sensation of a faster movement of the words than the second line’s pattern of one short and two longer sounds (“Mit Graun füllt”). Klopstock was a master of composing verse whose *Wortbewegung* reflects the sentiment of the poem: a summer’s pleasant fragrance demands a lighter sense of time than the experience of horror. A poet of the *Empfindsamkeit*, Klopstock attributes the capacity to experience passion, emotion, and feeling largely to these expressions and perceptions of time and the relationality between sounds. Poetry, unlike sculpture and painting, accomplishes the task of controlling time through its organization of slow and fast, short and long sounds. In addition to the expression of time (*Zeitausdruck*), Klopstock writes in the preface to *Oden und Elegien*, the movement of words also makes use of the relation between sound and its various properties (*Tonverhalt*).

Whether the emotion a poem evokes is gentleness or strength, vivacity or lethargy, fierceness or composure, festiveness or anxiety depends, in other words, on *Tonverhalt* more than it does on words that bear those particular meanings. Skillful control, Klopstock writes, requires recognizing the

¹⁸⁸ “The movement of words is either slow or fast. It has, in this sense, *time-expression*...the movement of words has to be observed from another point of view as well. Long and short sounds have such converging or conflicting relations to each other, that even an inattentive ear recognizes it.” Klopstock, “Vom deutschen Hexameter,” 126.

¹⁸⁹ Klopstock, *Oden*, 1:265.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:259.

differences between length and brevity as they occur in the German language, such that various sets of relations among them (as in different ways long and short sounds are combined in a particular stanza or line) generate syntactic and semantic movement. Being able to measure and manage movement in this way, poetry does not surrender to time; it masterfully manipulates and creates its own.

Poetry is art for ears. Klopstock's poetic theory of movement approaches time from the relativity of melody and rhythm, not, as Sculpture and Painting at the beginning of the poem attempt to argue, from the perspective of vision and visual dimensionality. Klopstock's *Zeitausdruck* vis-à-vis the spatial dimension of physical bodies formulates a version of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's account of the limits of painting and poetry work. Lessing writes in *Laokoon* (1766):

Dem Auge bleiben die betrachteten Teile beständig gegenwärtig; es kann sie abermals und abermals überlaufen: für das Ohr hingegen sind die vernommenen Teile verloren, wann sie nicht in dem Gedächtnis zurückbleiben. Und bleiben sie schon da zurück: welche Mühe, welche Anstrengung kostet es, ihre Eindrücke alle in eben der Ordnung so lebhaft zu erneuern, sie nur mit einer mäßigen Geschwindigkeit auf einmal zu überdenken, um zu einem etwanigen Begriffe des Ganzen zu gelangen!¹⁹¹

Lessing's ironic presentation of the effortless presence of an image aims to dismantle Horace's maxim that poetry and painting are alike and therefore comparable arts. Arguing for developing modes of aesthetic judgment that recognize each of the two arts as their own, Lessing defines painting as an art of space, poetry as an art of time. For Lessing, the visual arts organize their signifying structure around spatial principles (forms and colors) while poetry arranges its signs according to temporal structures. Thus, while a painting or sculpture can only represent objects "side by side," poetry "articulates sounds in time"; a painting cannot imitate or depict succession,

¹⁹¹ Lessing, *Laokoon: Oder Über Die Grenzen Der Malerei Und Poesie*, 124. "When we look at an object the various parts are always present to the eye. It can run over them again and again. The ear, however, loses the details it has heard, unless memory retain them. And if they be so retained, what pains and effort it costs to recall their impressions in the proper order and with even the moderate degree of rapidity necessary to the obtaining of a tolerable idea of the whole." Lessing, *Laocoön*, 102f.

while a poem can never show everything at once.¹⁹² For Lessing, the primary distinction between time and space has to be considered as the grounds for any aesthetic judgment made about the two arts. “Beständige Gegenwärtigkeit” (that which is always present) occupies space rather than time, and allows the observer of a painting to grasp its entirety without the effort of remembering particular parts in order to appreciate it. But because poetry does not engage with space on those same terms, we cannot judge a poem by its spatial economies (unless we prefer to lament the labor and effort that comes with such a false comparison).

Having established time and space as a radical structural difference between poetry and painting, Lessing refines and even dissolves the limits throughout the rest of *Laocoön*.¹⁹³ Paintings and sculpture exist as objects and bodies also in time, and any action (*Handlung*) expressed in a poem also has to make use of bodies or agents (*Körper*).¹⁹⁴ They both cross their general boundaries, since, of course, neither are objects timeless nor do actions happen in a void. “Lessing’s whole distinction,” W.J.T. Mitchell writes, “hangs, then, on the slender thread of the difference between primary and secondary representation, direct and indirect expression.”¹⁹⁵ While the general distinction between painting and poetry as spatial and temporal arts holds true, their particular practices also include a capacity to represent time (in the case of painting) and space (of poetry).

Klopstock’s poem, on its surface yielding an argument for the superiority of poetry over painting and sculpture, draws a much starker distinction between the arts. In the poem, the argument unfolds not along the clear lines of space versus time as different forms of organizing signs, but construes time as its central concern. Even in the discussion of physical bodies and media versus the immaterial durability of sound, space matters little as a category. Time and the capacity of managing time make all the difference: Painting and Sculpture, incapable of interiorizing time,

¹⁹² Lessing, *Laocoön*, 91.

¹⁹³ See Mitchell, “The Politics of Genre.”

¹⁹⁴ Lessing, *Laocoön*, 91.

¹⁹⁵ Mitchell, “The Politics of Genre,” 102.

cannot persist *in time*, which eventually leads to their “withering”; Poetry, however, persists because it makes time its internal force. “Beständige Gegenwärtigkeit,” for Lessing, constitutes a fundamental feature of the visual arts’ ability to persist in time, while for Klopstock such a “beständige Gegenwärtigkeit” manifests a lack of expressiveness and movement. “Weilen,” “stehen,” and “ruhen” (to stay, stand, and rest) are all verbs Klopstock attributes to sculpture and painting as forms of incapacity. Lessing ironically describes movement as a threat to lastingness: to the eye of the observer, every part of the artwork is consistently and effortlessly present, but to the ear the lack of consistency creates all sorts of problems, from losing or forgetting certain parts, to the inability to reconstruct order, to the difficulty and burden of remembering a work of art in its entirety. For Klopstock, such “movement” speaks to poetry’s powerful expressiveness. Where Painting and Sculpture fail to master time, Poetry bears as multilayered, persuasive, and persistent engagement with it.

So far, I have discussed the importance of time and temporality in Klopstock’s poem in two ways. First, in relation to materiality and its being subject to the forces of time, and second, in its regard for the movement of words and *Zeitausdruck* as poetic meter’s primary concern. Lessing’s comment on memory and lasting-over-time adds a third temporal dimension to Klopstock’s poem, that of poetry’s capacity to *organize* memory. In the poem, while the three arts never mention memory as a practice of organizing time and space, their dispute culminates in an event designed to commemorate: the ceremonious and symbolic crowing of Poetry as triumphant winner. The festive event at the end of the poem represents Poetry’s immortalization as superior form on the grounds of its superior performance of temporality. No other form of art manages time quite as elegantly, no other form performs the work of memory, lastingness, and immortality as aptly as poetry. For Lessing, such argumentation would prove fallacious (since the visual arts ought to be judged by their means of spatial representation), but in Klopstock’s poem the whole argument about artistic

superiority is made on the grounds of temporal representation. The idea of memory in “Die Bildhauerkunst, die Malerey, und die Dichtkunst” is first and foremost the idea of a temporal structure. All its instances of memory in practice are remarkably centered on the idea that temporal permanence surpasses spatial permanence. The ceremony happens both at the end of the poem and at a certain moment of the argument, with the visual icons (the wreath, roses, and oak leaves) emphasizing the contrast between ephemerality and eternity, and the verbal figures symbolizing feats of endurance, wisdom, and immortality. To organize memory, the poem tells us, is to hold the tension between the irreversible progress of time and the expression of time (*Zeitausdruck*) as internal force. Incapable of keeping this balance, Sculpture and Painting can only capitulate to Poetry.

There is one final twist to the poem. Having established the argument at the level of the poem’s dialogue and against the background of Klopstock’s poetics of movement and sound, we may now ask: does the poem do what it tell us it does? The first thing to notice about the structure of the poem is that Poetry, the art of words, says very little in the dialogue (two and a half lines) and when it does, it says nothing about itself. Its only moment of taking part in the argument consists, rather, of elevating the other two arts: “Mit Rosen kränz’ ich, farbige Zaubrin, dich,/Und dich mit Laube, parische, wie es hell/der Eich’ entsproß!” In fact, throughout the entire poem none of the arts speaks directly about itself. Sculpture and Painting, too, engage in describing and addressing first each other and finally Poetry. On the level of the dialogue, then, none of three arts speaks for itself and only about the other(s). What does it mean to speak for oneself, then, the poem asks? To answer this question, the poem forces us to move from the level of the argument to consider its other means on the level of its overall structure. Moving from the content to form, we notice that Poetry’s only appearance as speaker, introducing the turn of the argument, marks the only moment in which the poem uses the subjective first person. Sculpture and Painting, when they speak, only ever speak in the second person or the subjective plural. Poetry’s voice is quieter in terms of the

quantity of its words, but more forceful in terms of being the only one of the arts to speak for itself after all. The whole structure of the poem presents us with a series of contradictions between the content of its verbal representations and their form, complicating any direct answer to what it means to “speak.” In the end, the poem rejects any metaphorical notions of “speaking,” giving voice to the personified arts solely by letting the poem speak for them.

Our last clue lies in the poem’s final lines, “Aber ach unser Kranz/Verwelkt, wenn wir nicht, deiner würdig,/Bilden das Lebendste, das du sangest.” Through this last verdict, the ultimate division between the arts returns us to the difference between image and word, visual and verbal representation. A simple parallel structure contrasts visualization with song (“Bilden das Lebendste, das du sangest”) and withering with grandeur. If only the visual arts were able to sing, they too could triumph over death and reach “the most living,” Painting laments. For Poetry, “time has no limits,” Sculpture admits a few lines earlier. What neither of them realizes—what neither of them can ever realize—is that for the reader of the poem, the wreath is not simply an iconic image; it becomes a dramatic verbal strategy as well. Visually, the poem borrows from drama’s use of clearly delineating the character’s speech. All parts of the dialogue are distinctly indicated (using M., B., and D. to tell the reader where each part begins and ends). But, unlike drama, there is no strict separation between their speech part. Rather, they are subordinated to the poem’s meter. The six stanzas of four lines each follow a consistent syllable count, with the first and second lines consisting of eleven syllables, the third of nine, and the fourth of ten. As a result of this consistent meter, the poem breaks the lines over a series of enjambments and indicates the separation of the dialogic lines by adding a blank space between them. The wreath, upon finishing the poem, becomes a verbal and even a visual effect, interweaving the parts of speech metrically through the rhythm and visually on the printed page. “Der lebendige Ausdruck,” Klopstock writes, “muß vornämlich auch dem Inhalte

angemessen seyn.”¹⁹⁶ The dialogue represented as wreath to the eye and to the ear heralds the poem’s final triumph as “lively expression”: to speak by showing, and to show by speaking. Klopstock’s emphasis remains on poetry as a form of art that is meant to be heard and spoken aloud. Whatever visual image the poem “shows” depends first and foremost on the poem’s *Wortbewegung*, the movement of words produced by the relation between long and short syllables, faster and slower sounding lines, and by the interdependence between a verse’s meaning and the aural perception of its emotional effects. What the poem has shown us is how the poet achieves the balance between poetry’s means of expression and that which it expresses, the poem’s with-expression, its *Mitausdruck*, slowly taking shape between the “seam” of the rigorous meter and its melody.

4. Utopia of Grammar

Klopstock’s contrast between “bilden” (to picture or represent,) and “singen” (to sing) points us to the core of his theory of poetic language. Poetry is an art of sound and movement. Even when a poem makes use of images, symbols, and visual representation, it subordinates them almost completely to meter and melody. The wreath in the poem, for example, is not merely a symbol *representing* temporality and multiplicity, but has to be *performed* by the verse in order to truly appear in the poem. For Klopstock, imagery can never be enough and never by itself express sentiment in language. “The imaginative, metaphoric vehicles of a poem,” Roman Jakobson writes, “may be opposed to its matter-of-fact level by a sharp concomitant contrast of their grammatical constituents.”¹⁹⁷ Klopstock’s almost radical rejection of figurative language as poetic device is more than the opposition between poetry’s “metaphoric vehicles” and its “grammar” as Jakobson writes over a century later; Klopstock dismisses any ontological distance between that which is expressed

¹⁹⁶ Klopstock, “Vom deutschen Hexameter,” 151f.

¹⁹⁷ Jakobson, “Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry,” 43.

and its modes of expression in the first place. “[Klopstock’s] Sprache,” Menninghaus writes, “ist weder eine der Allegorie noch eine des Symbols, weder eine der Metapher noch der Metonymie, weder eine ‘uneigentlich’ noch eine ‘eigentliche.’”¹⁹⁸ Binary distinctions between verbal and visual representation or between “representation” and “object” do not apply to the framework of Klopstock’s poetics. Within such binary frameworks, we would be right to understand the visual arts as a form of art that depicts, represents, or describes, deriving its force primarily from transferring or transposing between meaning and expression. “Bilden,” to generate an image of something, follows those vertical processes separating object and image. “Singen,” poetry’s primary means of communication, evokes, elates, and becomes, over and over, the lively and living expression of its object. Klopstock’s poetics, Menninghaus writes, has to be understood as a radically “horizontal” or “syntagmatic” approach to poetry and language, whose movement of words is not defined by spatial distance but by temporal sequence.¹⁹⁹

What distinguishes a poem from a painting for Klopstock, then, is its means of organizing the movement between parts and a whole on an axis of time rather than space. *Ausdruck* organizes parts of speech such as words, syllables, and sounds, generating an undivided *Mitausdruck*. *Ausdruck* alone does not make a poem. Only through the organization of *Mitausdruck* do all parts come together as a unified and harmonic expression. *Mitausdruck* is crucial to Klopstock’s poetics, for the term combines *Ausdruck* with temporality, pronouncing the difference between description and movement. “Die Malerei,” Klopstock writes, “zeigt ihre Gegenstände auf einmal; die Dichtkunst zeigt sie in einer gewissen Zeit.”²⁰⁰ “There is,” Roman Jakobson writes, “a remarkable analogy between the role of grammar in poetry and the painter’s composition, based on a latent or patent

¹⁹⁸ Menninghaus, “Klopstocks Poetik der schnellen ‘Bewegung,’” 328.

¹⁹⁹ See Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Klopstock, “Zur Poetik,” 162. “Painting shows its objects all at once; poetry shows them in due time”

geometrical order or on a revulsion against geometrical arrangements.”²⁰¹ While geometry organizes space, grammar organizes time, and while a painter uses geometrical order (or revolts against it) to arrange her objects, a poet turns to grammar.

“Grammar” has a long and vast history. In its simplest definition, “grammar” refers to a system of rules that define and determine the structure of language. But, Robert Stockhammer writes, it has never been clear whether grammar is to be understood as science (*episteme*), art (*technê*), or empirical practice (*empeiria*).²⁰² A versatile idea, “grammar” has long functioned as a site negotiating the relationships between morality, education, and rhetoric (Quintilian), power and knowledge (from Isidor of Seville to Michel Foucault), logic and philosophy (Wittgenstein, Frege), culture and identity (Vico, Saussure, Bakhtin), or authority and freedom (Aristotle, Nietzsche). The list of rhetorical, philosophical, and intellectual frameworks governing the history of grammar is long, much longer than this chapter could adequately address or even mention—especially if we do not limit our understanding of grammar’s history to the science of language (*Sprachwissenschaft*) or its development within the history of linguistics, but place it at the center multiple histories of thought since the very beginnings of language, writing, and communication.²⁰³ Grammar, this long intellectual history and versatility shows, may be one of the oldest forms of organization. The discussion of grammar includes, as most exciting ideas do, much traffic between literal and metaphorical uses of the term, between particular definitions and general reflection.

Klopstock does not come into of the history of grammar alone. Two influential works on the relation between poetic composition and the rules of German grammar appeared in the decade

²⁰¹ Jakobson, “Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry,” 43.

²⁰² See Stockhammer, *Grammatik*, 14. “Nicht einmal der Status ihrer Tätigkeit ist eindeutig zu bestimmen. Denn immer wieder war strittig, ob die Grammatik als *episteme* (*scientia*, eine vollausgebildete Wissenschaft), als *technê* (*ars*, eine wissensgestützte Praxis und ein praktiziertes Wissen) oder doch nur als *empeiria* (*peritia*, eine quasi handwerkliche Fähigkeit) gelten kann.”

²⁰³ I am leaving completely aside, here, also the particular role of grammar in the (comparatively young) field of linguistics. Stockhammer’s extensive book on “Grammatik” offers a wonderful overview and discussion of grammar’s long history across various fields, traditions (though only Western), and periods.

preceding *Der Messias*: Johann Christoph Gottsched's *Versuch einer critischen Dichtkunst vor die Deutschen* (1729) and Johann Jakob Breitinger's *Critische Dichtkunst* (1740). In the late eighteenth century, Johann Gottfried Herder, Carl Friedrich Aichinger, and Johann Christoph Adelung all contributed to the discussion about the nature and origin of the German language and its proper grammar.²⁰⁴ Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel, too, added (mostly in their fragments) to the lively *Zeitgeist* of grammar at that time. *How* grammar organizes language and whether it does so naturally or artificially was as much the center of pragmatic debates about the institutionalization of the German language as it was the controversial subject of ideological and aesthetic arguments of that time.

Klopstock, the “most important grammatician-poet in the second half of the eighteenth century,” turns to grammar as primary organizing principle of poetry. His formulation of a German poetics begins, therefore, with a grammatical argument:

Die Römer gingen so weit, daß sie auch die grammatikalischen Idiotismos der Griechen nachahmten. Meine Meinung ist nicht, daß die Deutschen dieses auch tun sollen...ich meine nur, daß sie sich das Geschrei derjenigen, welche die platte Sprache des Volks allein für gut Deutsch zu halten scheinen, nicht abhalten lassen sollen, den Griechen und Römern in ihren glücklichen Ausdrücken der Poesie nachzuahmen. Viele von diesen Ausdrücken könnten zwar auch, weil sie oft von ihnen gebraucht werden, Idiotismi heißen; sie sind aber vielmehr, auf der Seite des poetischen Ausdruckes überhaupt, anzusehen, und dies so sehr, daß dabei gar nicht mehr die Frage von der Grammatik irgend einer Sprache ist; sondern von den Regeln desjenigen poetischen Ausdrucks, der in jede gebildete Sprache aufgenommen zu werden verdiente.²⁰⁵

If, Klopstock writes, one is content with the “flatness” of the German language, one should feel free to go ahead and continue writing poetry in mere “idiotic” imitation of Latin and Greek poetry.

Poetry and language develop in accordance. Inseparable, then, are the poet's programmatic revitalization of German poetry and the development of a German language liberated from the tight

²⁰⁴ See Gardt, Andreas, *Geschichte der Sprachwissenschaft in Deutschland*.

²⁰⁵ Klopstock, “Von der Sprache der Poesie,” 32. “The Romans went to such lengths in order to imitate the grammatical idiotism of the Greek. It is not my opinion that the Germans should do the same...I only mean, that those, who seem to like the flat language of the people, should not be kept for clamoring and from imitating the Greeks and Romans and their felicitous poetic expressions. We could call many of these expressions, because they are so often used, idiotisms; they are, however, moreover part of poetic expression in general, so much so, that here our question is not about the grammar of any language; but the rules of poetic expression, which deserves to be included in any language.”

grasp of Latin and Greek. Klopstock even goes a step further suggesting that grammar determines not only “any language,” but that grammar governs “poetic expression,” which in turn is essential to language. This line of thought brings us closer to what Klopstock means by “grammar.” We find that Klopstock indicates a slight distinction between “the grammar of language” and the “grammar of poetry,” the former in service of shaping a national, cultural identity, the latter aiding poetic expression. Klopstock is evoking two different ideas of grammar: grammar as a set of syntactical rules (*Wortfügung*) and grammar as means of poetic expression. When he addresses the relation between nation, language, and poetry he deliberately includes poetry as an equal part of a triangle defining a self-contained and authentically present German tradition. Poetic expression “deserves to become part of language,” he writes, suggesting that any understanding of language would be incomplete were it not to include poetry.

At the center of the triangular constellation between national identity, a unified, independent, and vigorous language, and the writing of poetry, grammar functions as the common ground that allows for the traffic between three measures of “Germanness.” Each of them shapes how Klopstock thinks of grammar as a term that manages to hold in tension his ideological critique of language, his implementation of a pragmatic system governing linguistic practices, and his meticulous theory of versification and poetics. The difference between an impoverished “flat German” and the sovereign German Klopstock envisions can then be understood in terms of this grammatical activity. Passive are the exuberant imitation of Greek and Latin syntax and the continuation of writing poetry in the style of a non-German language. Such passive subordination to the existing Greek and Latin grammar has ideological and aesthetic implications that can only be countered by turning to grammar as an active field for negotiating the terms by which national culture and identity, language, and poetry are measured.

What's remarkable about Klopstock's understanding of grammar is the great deal of power he affords to poetic expression. The relation between poetry and grammar enters Klopstock's discourse at a time when neither "poetry" nor "grammar" are settled fields, and both are undergoing significant changes. At the onset of an era that would mark the beginning of "German literature" as a national literature, the rules of poetic language could not be taken for granted. Martin Opitz's *Buch von der Deutschen Poeterey*, a book on poetics that for the first time standardized the rules for German poetry, was by then over than one hundred years old; it still regarded, much to Klopstock's dismay, the alexandrine as the meter best suited to German poetry. If the mid-eighteenth century debates about poetry and grammar were heated, it was because there existed little consensus about whether grammar was the hope stemming from the young or the shackle imposed by the old. In 1769, Johann Gottfried Herder, proclaimed the end of "grammar and grammarians," insisting that grammar impedes the freedom of thought by restricting creativity and thinking to the rules of written language.²⁰⁶ Others, like Johann Christoph Adelung and Karl Philipp Moritz, continued their work on defining, formulating, and revising German grammar as a way of reflecting on the nature of German language. "Grammatische Reflexionen," Robert Stockhammer writes, "besitzen einen integralen Status in Poetiken nur—aber immerhin—überall dort, wo sich die Sprache, in der gedichtet wird, nicht von selbst versteht."²⁰⁷ At times, language "is not taken for granted" and demands reflection and explanation, or, if we understand "sich nicht von selbst versteht" in a more literal sense, language in crisis always requires its reorientation alongside epistemological shifts. Grammar enters poetic discourse when language itself is unstable. For Klopstock, there is also truth in the reversal of this statement: poetry enters grammatical discourse in times when poetry is not taken for granted. Klopstock saw poetry as catalyst helping to transform the German language. If we

²⁰⁶ Stockhammer, *Grammatik*, 452.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 451. "Reflections on grammar have an integral status in poetics only—but at least they do—where the language, in which poetry is composed, is not taken for granted."

understand grammar as a method of organization, it is important to see that for Klopstock such organization is not merely a matter of applying a set of rules, but an ongoing, dynamic process pushing the limits of linguistic and poetic possibility.

Klopstock was a meticulous poet and grammarian. Many of his odes appeared in several versions, each attempting perfection of the balance between meter and sounds. “Frühlingsfeier,” for example, exists in an early version (published in 1759) and a later, revised version with slight adjustments to the meter, arrangement on the page, and choice of words (published in 1771). A comparative reading (aloud) of the two versions demonstrates very clearly (and beautifully) how much of the poem’s effects depend on just the slightest differences in speed and sound. His attention to the precise composition of an emotion or theme leads him to often include the metrical scheme—many of which he invented himself—between title and poem to indicate to the reader how the poem is supposed to be read.

In 1779, Klopstock published *Vom Deutschen Hexameter*, an essay in which the discussion of poetic meter as part of grammar takes an extensive shape. Klopstock tentatively presents this discussion as “his grammar” in inconspicuous parentheses halfway through the text, one of the few times throughout his work we will find an explicit reference to grammar and what it does.²⁰⁸ The majority of the essay discusses at length how feet (iamb, trochee, spondee, and dactyl, for the most part) are units of metric organization as much as they themselves organize, that is, produce sound, rhythm, and melody. A grammatical manual for poetic practice, the essay includes sections devoted to organizing sound and relation between sounds into poetic categories of emotion. Consider, for example, this list of the range of short and long sounds in a foot (*Zeitausdruck*):

Langsam	∪ – –	Der Ausruf.
Langsamer	– – ∪	Ausrufe.
Noch langsamer	– ∪ –	Wetterstrahl.

²⁰⁸ Klopstock, “Vom deutschen Hexameter,” 98.

Schnell	U – U	Gesänge.
Schneller	– U U	Flüchtige.
Noch schneller	U U –	Die Gewalt. ²⁰⁹

On a very basic level, Klopstock aims to show, certain German words already embody particular emotions according to the temporal expression of their pronunciation. “Gesänge,” for example, naturally sounds “fast,” whereas “Flüchtige” (ephemeral) sounds even “faster.” In addition, time and emotion or passion (*Leidenschaft*, a term often used by Klopstock) can be modified by simple grammatical adjustments. The difference between “Der Ausruf” and “Ausrufe” already means the difference between “slow” and “slower.” These categories expand, in the next step, to multiple feet and the relation among them. A few pages later, Klopstock offers a short lexicon of poetic feet:

Sanftes.

- U Laute.
- U – U Klagestimme.
- U – U U lieblich tönende.
- U – U Gesänge.
- U – U – U die Wiederhülle.
- U – U U – U des Baches Gelispel.
- U – U U gewendete.

or

Ernstvolles.

- – – U mitausrufend.
- U – – – des Anfalls Wut.
- U – “Wetterstrahl.”
- U – – – U des Aufruhrs Brausen.
- U – – – U U die Unglückselige.²¹⁰

Some feet will sound “gentle,” and others “grave.” These examples of melodic variations among different feet and combinations of feet illustrate the methodical system with which Klopstock approaches his “grammatical poetics.” But they also make visible how bending certain common grammatical structures becomes crucial to his overall projects. In order to produce “graveness,”

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 132.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 138f.

Klopstock uses the attributive genitive form “des Anfalls Wut” rather than the more common “die Wut des Anfalls.” Similarly, “des Aufruhrs Brausen” only produces a grave-sounding foot through its genitive form while the same genitive allows “des Baches Gelispel” to sound gentle.

Klopstock’s first extensive vision of grammar as a cultural institution of a German nation state appears in 1774 in *Die Deutsche Gelehrtenrepublik*. The text, a utopia of a German republic ruled by literati, is presented as a written document outlining the national institutions Klopstock envisioned as pillars of a humanistic society and describes in detail its demographic, legal, cultural, and even quotidian makeup.²¹¹ Klopstock, presenting himself as the editor of the document, lays out the structure of his utopian society in three parts. The first section (“The establishment of the Republic”) summarizes the social organization; it is followed by a section on the republic’s laws (“Die Gesetze”), and finally a chronological account of the last Diet (“Geschichte des letzten Landtages”) from the morning of its first to the morning of its twelfth and last day. A colorful collection of anecdotes, descriptions, events, definitions, and advice, *Die deutsche Gelehrtenrepublik* writes of a nation built and governed by intellectuals and educated men. In one of its most delightful moments, it imagines a system of punishments that consists of various kinds of laughter and facial gestures indicating degrees of scorn and mockery.²¹² Large parts of the text are devoted to language and the work of the poets, who form their own guild and enjoy high occupational prestige in the republic. The section on laws includes entries on language, literature schools, logomachy, and buzzwords, all preparing the ground for the discussion of a “new German grammar” during the proceedings of the Diet in the last part.

Reading the *Gelehrtenrepublik* as a reflection on poetics proved to be the work’s most significant contribution, which otherwise did not fare all too well at the time of its publication. “The

²¹¹ For a brief account of the text’s publication history and reception see Kohl, “Die deutsche Gelehrtenrepublik.”

²¹² “Das Stirnrunzeln zeigt nicht Spott, sondern nur Verdruß an./Das Lächeln ist angenehmer Spott./Die laute Lache ist voller herzlicher Spott./Das Naserümpfen ist Spott und Verachtung zugleich./Das Hohenglächter ist beydes im höchsten Grade.” Klopstock, *Die deutsche Gelehrtenrepublik*, 15.

work,” Katrin Kohl writes, “inspired the young generation of poets” and “testifies to a dissatisfaction with the normative poetics and grammars of the rationalist tradition.”²¹³ Against such normativity, Klopstock inverts the relation between the rules of a system and its object by turning to the object itself. “Der Grammatiker,” he writes on the role of the grammarian, “lehrt die Regeln der Sprache, und bemerkt die Bedeutungen der Wörter. Weil er die Sprache nehmen muß, wie sie ist, und nicht, wie sie, nach seinem gegründeten oder unbegründeten Bedünken, seyn sollte.”²¹⁴ A grammarian is first and foremost a man of letters, a teacher and savant, not an authoritative regulator of language. In order to formulate a “new German grammar,” a member of the Diet presents the results from a discussion about grammar to the other members, who then record these “grammatical fragments.”²¹⁵ This small contextual detail of the process allows Klopstock to rhetorically emphasize grammar as a non-normative method organizing language. There is no single name giving “the new German grammar” its authority (none of the Diet’s member has in fact a name) and no claim to completeness. “Wir liefern hier einige dieser Fragmente in der Ordnung,” Klopstock writes in the introduction to the section, “wie sie uns, nach Veranlassung des fortwährenden Gesprächs, sind vorgelesen worden.”²¹⁶ Unlike the Greek and Latin grammars which had until then firmly established the rules of language, the “new German grammar” is seen as method of organizing the German language as it is and as it is commonly used—it’s not examples whose exemplarity simultaneously enacts a rule and expresses it in practice. The relation between grammar and language in Klopstock’s republic of letters is again and again presented as organic interdependence, paving the way to a German cultural identity that would connect the speakers of the language and upraise the German tradition as one of the great cultural forces in the world.

²¹³ Kohl, “Die deutsche Gelehrtenrepublik,” 602.

²¹⁴ Klopstock, *Die deutsche Gelehrtenrepublik*, 120. “The grammarian teaches the rules of the language, and notes the meanings of words. Because he has to understand language as it is and not in the ways, according to substantiated or unsubstantiated, it should be.”

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Ibid. “We offer here a few fragments in the order in which they were presented to us after initiating the ongoing discussion.”

Klopstock's attention to grammar and language, however, speaks above all to the poet's interest in grammar as poetic reflection. Even if we read *Die deutsche Gelehrtenrepublik* in terms of its political motivations, the text persistently returns us to its poetic value both in content and form. On the level of the text's diegesis, we find the Klopstock's humanist vision of the republic depends highly on the work of the poets: they are among the most valued and important guilds of the republic, many of the republic's institutions and laws, even whole nights of the Diet's meeting are dedicated to the discussion of poetry and poetics. The *Gelehrtenrepublik*, while presenting itself as a kind of blueprint for the establishment of a German nation, never completely denies its nature as a fictional and self-reflective work. We are not reading a manifesto or a call to arms, but the work of a poet and his two fictional editors. That the task of grammar and the thinking of poetry are so closely intertwined in Klopstock's utopian imagination of a German culture and state, figures, in those respects, a poetic utopia in which poetry and grammar provide the impetus for change.

A more explicit theoretical approach to the relationship between grammar and poetry would not appear until 1794, twenty years after the *Gelehrtenrepublik*, when Klopstock published his last major theoretical work on poetry, the dramatic text *Grammatische Gespräche* (*Grammatical Dialogues*). While the *Gelehrtenrepublik* depicts grammar and poetry as objects of dispute and discussion, the *Grammatische Gespräche* stages numerous dialogues between personified grammatical and poetic units and concepts. The first part of the *Gespräche*, which was only published in fragments, consists of seven titled dialogues: "Die Grammatik" ("Grammar"), "Die Aussprache" ("Pronunciation"), "Der Wohlklang" ("Sound"), "Die Wortbildung" ("Word formation"), "Die Kühr" ("Choice"). All dialogues feature several characters; in the first dialogue, for example, the characters are "Grammar," "Imagination," "Judgment," and "Sentiment"; in another, "Sound," "Letters," "Euphonia," and

“Language use” debate each other.²¹⁷ Where die *Gelehrtenrepublik* speaks of an ongoing competition between the classical language and German as Klopstock’s political endeavor, the *Gespräche* enacts the rivalry through a series of “Lucian dialogues,” a sometimes comical and antagonistic back-and-forth between allegorical virtues left to the judgment of the reader.²¹⁸ At the beginning of the dialogue on grammar, the four characters engage each other in a discussion of its purpose:

Gr. Je grösser der Umfang der Regeln, desto kleiner ihre Zahl. Dies gehört auch mir zur Kürze; und hier hindern mich deiner Freundinnen an nichts.
 Urt. Und deine Ordnung?
 Einb. Ich mag nicht vorher wissen, was ich hören soll.
 Urt. Ich möchte aber gern das Ganze übersehn.
 Einb. Kanst du es nicht übersehn, wenn es da gewesen ist? Wofern du weisst, daß ich bleiben soll, so hörst du hievon auf.
 Urt. Du siehest, Grammatik, dasz schwer mit ihr auszukommen ist.
 Einb. Deine Ordnung wird doch nicht so ängstlich sein, daß du nicht auch wohl etwas da vorkommen lassest, wo du meinst, dasz es mir am besten gefallen werde, ob es gleich, nach der Grillenhaftigkeit meines Freundes, irgendwo anders hin gehören mag. Thu mir das immer zu liebe.
 Urt. Ich hoffe, du willfahrst ihr wenigstens nicht oft.
 Einb. Denke nur nicht, ich verlange von ihr, dasz sie ohne Ordnung sey: aber mit unter etwas, welches wir noch nicht, oder nicht mehr erwarten, ist wohl so gut, als wenn sich immer alles nacheinander abwindet.²¹⁹

“Grammar” itself, perhaps a reflection of the first line in which the personified character insists on its preference of brevity, speaks only briefly and lets imagination, judgment, and sentiment

²¹⁷ I translate “Wohlklang” generically as “sound”; a more accurate English translation would be “pleasing sound.” In this dialogue, the German “Wohlklang” debates with “Euphonie,” both meaning “pleasing sound” in their respective languages.

²¹⁸ See Stockhammer, *Grammatik*, 456. Lucian is also explicitly mentioned in the first dialogue, see Klopstock, *Grammatische Gespräche*, 10.

²¹⁹ Klopstock, *Grammatische Gespräche*, 7f.

“Gr. The larger the extent of rules, the smaller their number. This too belongs to my brevity; and your friends do not keep me from anything.

Judg. And your order?

Imag. I don’t want to know beforehand what I should hear.

Judg. But I would like to be able to oversee the whole.

Imag. Can you not oversee it, when it was there? As long as you know, that I should stay, you should stop talking about it.

Judg. You see, grammar, it’s hard to get along with her.

Imag. Your order is not going to be so cowardly that it would let something appear where I like it, even if my whimsical friend here believes it belonged somewhere else. Do it for my sake.

Judg. I hope you don’t comply with her too often.

Imag. Don’t think I ask of her to be entirely without order: but from time to time something we have not expected or don’t expect anymore is as good, as if everything always unfolding in succession.”

debate the task of grammar amongst each other. In this part of the dialogue, “Imagination” and “Judgment” voice their conflicting demands for what and how grammar should organize. Their debate centers on three organizational principles: order (“Ordnung”), entirety (“das Ganze”), and sequence (“nacheinander”). A predictable order, “Imagination” insists, hinders the freedom of its expression. If the order is too strict, it would tell you beforehand what you ought to know, preventing imagination from its greatest powers to deviate from such order. For “Judgment,” however, order is necessary to facilitate an overview of a situation or an object in its entirety, for only then would judgment be reasonable and not limited to particular instances. Lastly, while grammar’s task is to provide order it should not demand to adhere to it all the time, “Imagination” interjects. To order experience as linear sequences of occurrences precludes the possibility of unexpected experiences to take place, thereby rendering imagination obsolete. Grammar’s task to order, then, faces several challenges posed by the range of faculties necessary in language and thought, represented here by the difference between judgment and imagination (and later in the dialogue sentiment): to offer shared rules, but not take them too seriously, to allow for a perspective of a whole, but without preventing singularity, and to impose a certain sequence, but not restrict the occurrence of unexpected developments.

The vivid tensions underlying the dialogues in *Grammatische Gespräche* are never resolved. What we learn from the disputes between the linguistic, philosophical, and poetic concepts is the range of contradicting forces grammar has to manage and organize. As a means of organization, grammar becomes a powerful site of renegotiation and reformulating “Germanness.” Grammar’s long history and tradition as a linguistic institution gives it the legitimacy that at the same time it aims to dismantle. When Klopstock turns to grammar as a concept that combines his interests in founding a German cultural identity, institutionalizing German as a language, and developing a new poetics, he is well aware of grammar’s historical functions and meanings. Throughout his writings,

the poet, implicitly and explicitly, alludes to these functions and makes use of them. Rhetoricians will find that Klopstock does not operate outside the legacy of Quintilian or Lucian; readers of Dante will recognize the defense of popular or vernacular language against the linguistic authority of Latin and grammar's purpose of defining one's own cultural identity against "foreign" influences. The multitude of grammatical functions in Klopstock's work speaks also to rejection of any claim of completeness the poet ascribes to "grammar." At the end of the dialogues, "Dipsophos" (a term Klopstock defines as "position") and "Harmosis" (tuning, harmony, fitting together) debate the nature of language in general and grammar's task to organize language. Their dramatic last words, after realizing they have only taken a few steps forward but have yet to reach a conclusion, are both capitulating to the impossibility of the task and hopeful in the purposiveness of their own venture:

Dips. Und wir wollen gleichwol suchen?
 Harm. Giebst du schon wieder auf?²²⁰

To persist, in grammar, is finally what Klopstock deems the utopia of poetry. In 1798, four years after the publication of the *Grammatische Gespräche*, August Wilhelm Schlegel published "Ein Gespräch über Klopstocks grammatische Gespräche" ("A dialogue on Klopstock's Grammatic Dialogues"), a witty parody of Klopstock's text. The "dialogue about the dialogue" emulates the rivalry between poetry and grammar of Klopstock's *Gespräche* and begins as follows:

Poesie. Soll ich meinen Augen trauen? Du lebst also wirklich?
 Grammatik. Ja, es ist mir selbst wunderlich dabey zu Muthe. Vor Klopstocks grammatischen Gesprächen ist es mir niemals begegnet.
 Poesie. Ganz recht! Klopstocks grammatische Gespräche. Derentwegen bin ich eben herbeschieden. Aber sage mir, was ich mit ihnen zu schaffen? Ich trete ja nicht darin auf.
 Grammatik. Wie konntest du? Weißt du nicht, daß Leben und Tod einander immer das Gleichgewicht halten, und daß, wo die Grammatik lebt, die Poesie todt seyn muß?
 Poesie. Wir werden uns also auch jetzt freundschaftlich darum vertragen, und beyde mit einem halben Leben zufrieden seyn müßen.²²¹

²²⁰ Ibid., 360.

Dips. And we are nonetheless going to search?
 Harm. Are you giving up again?

Schlegel's parody entails both homage and critique. Skeptical of Klopstock's overemphasis of "Germanness" as a national concept, Schlegel argues for a "universalistic perspective [but] without fully discrediting Klopstock's approach."²²² Whereas Klopstock's insistence on defining the scope of German culture within the narrowed frame of a self-contained "national language" did not gain much support from Schlegel, his reflection on grammar as poetic practice proved to be an intervention revered by the critic. Poetry and grammar meeting eye to eye in a conversation struck a chord with the *Zeitgeist* at the end of an Enlightenment that had begun to split between *emotio* and *ratio*, empirical sentiment and scientific reason. Klopstock "brought grammar to life," Schlegel writes in bewilderment in his dialogue. At first, reading these initial lines from Schlegel's dialogue between "Poetry" and "Grammar" appears to be a rather bleak statement about their incompatibility. "Where grammar is alive," the personified "Grammar" says, "poetry must be dead," and "Poetry" alleviates the grim choice between life and death by pronouncing they can "both be happy with just half a life." Another reading, however, grants poetry and grammar a friendship in which they complement each other only seemingly as contrary forces. Poetry is by no means dead, and neither is grammar, since both continue to be able to speak for themselves throughout Schlegel's dialogic representation of their ongoing significance. Or, if grammar is alive when poetry is dead, then the opposite must also be true. To speak of "half a life," then, rather than a quantitative reduction of their relevance, draws a vision of their mutual embrace of life and death inherent in each. Not simply a choice between life and death in such a reading, the reciprocal relation between poetry and

²²¹ Schlegel, "Die Sprachen. Ein Gespräch über Klopstocks grammatische Gespräche," 3.

Poetry. Can I believe my own eyes? Are you truly alive?

Grammar. Yes, I myself feel strange about it. Before Klopstock's grammatic dialogues I had never felt it.

Poetry. That's right! Klopstock's grammatic dialogues. It is because of them I just appeared. But tell me, what do I have to do with them? I don't even make an appearance in them.

Grammar. How could you? Don't you know that life and death have always keep their balance and that where grammar is alive poetry must be dead?

Poetry. And so we will have to get along as friends, and both be happy with just half a life.

²²² See Kohl, *Poetologische Metaphern*, 583–85.

grammar offers the productive possibility Schlegel attributes to Klopstock's poetic innovation: to think grammar as a poet, and poetry as a grammarian. "Zu sterben/das ist Grammatik," we remember Ernst Meister's remarkable line, persists in poetry as if it were never dead to begin with, as if it needed to persist to hear Harmonis's inquisitive echo and finally answer: "no."

5. Between Information and Information

Klopstock's synthesis of poetry and grammar enters the history of information at a curious moment, perhaps unbeknownst to even the poet himself. Across the channel, British empiricism (via Francis Bacon) had prepared the philosophical grounds for detaching "information" from its active role in shaping the world. Just thirteen years older than Klopstock, David Hume had become a forerunner of the empiricist science of human nature, the belief that observation, experience, and feeling are the foundation for knowledge, and through knowledge, for all forms of social engagement including the ethical and moral. For Hume, all mental perceptions can be organized into two kinds, impressions and ideas, with an impression always preceding an idea. We can understand Hume's *impression* as an in-forming that happens when the individual mind perceives a multitude of sentiments. Between the impression of sentiment and the in-formation of an idea lies a world of complex processes trying to organize the relations between the universe, object, mind, and sense.

It helps to remember that in such a world information was not yet a mere bit-sized object of these processes, but a force that embodied the complexity of the distinction between form and content, emotion and reason, truth and representation. "*Information*," Peters writes, "was readily deployed in empiricist philosophy (though it played a less important role than other words such *impression* and *idea*) because it seemed to describe the mechanics of sensation: objects in the world in-form the senses. But sensation is entirely different from 'form'—the one is sensual, the other

intellectual; the one is subjective, the other objective.”²²³ Ultimately, the empiricist notions of sensation and form led, Peters argues, to the shift of information’s definition from “structure to stuff, from form to substance, from intellectual order to sensory impulses” thus paving the way for our modern understanding of the term.²²⁴ This shift has left its traces in the development of philosophical thought and can, as Peters convincingly demonstrates, be quite precisely located through the etymological-historical work of mapping the historical inversion of information.

Bringing Klopstock into this history requires a little work. Klopstock, for one, never uses the term *Information*, which does not make its way into the German language until much later (there is no entry on it, for instance, in Adelung’s dictionary of 1811 or the Grimm dictionary of the late nineteenth century). Nonetheless the collection of concepts surrounding form and content, impression and ex-pression, the notion that some external force would give shape and coherence to an object by transferring to it some self-orienting *idea*, belonged very much to the intellectual inheritance that came to Klopstock via Plato and, more immediately, German-language aestheticians like Lessing, Opitz, or Dürer. In his work the tension and movement around the origin of form—the idea that the proper German form of the German language emerges wholesale from the properly German rhythms of German speech, that the natural habits of German speakers untrammelled by the morbid and constraining influences of Latinate grammar were already, or always already, giving voice to the formal rules and regulations, whether grammatical or poetic, appropriate to their national tongue—belong very much to the longer history of thinking about the relation between what one might think of as happenstance and organization, or the world and the idea of the world, which bedevils Western philosophy from the Greeks forward.

What Klopstock does with this inheritance is captured neither by the old Platonic notion of *informare* (of form preceding a concept), nor its more modern empiricist use (of creating form), nor

²²³ Peters, “Information,” 12f.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

even by the still later idea of information that dominates the twentieth century and beyond (information as fact without form). When Klopstock develops the German hexameter, for example, he adapts the dactylic organization of the meter but changes the metric organization of the dactyl; the number of the metrical feet remains the same, but the dactyl moves from a syllable-based to a sound-based count; the spondee disappears in most places, since very few words in German are naturally spondaic. The form, in other words, is first adapted and subsequently reshaped from within, resulting in a new form more appropriate to its content (German poetic language). In a next step, Klopstock aims to remove or at least minimize any distinction between poetic form and poetic content in general—both his theory of *Wortbewegung* (the movement of words) and *Mitausdruck* (with-expression) exemplify Klopstock's amalgamation of metric organization and sentimental intention, neither of which exists by or for itself. Form, for Klopstock, has a recursive quality. Some German words or word constellations naturally produce the sound equivalent to their meaning (“flüchtige” sounds fast, “die Unglückselige” sounds serious). These natural schemas (which are themselves unities of form and content) then lead Klopstock to organize a whole meter into sequences of sound according to the sentiment of the poem. This is the work of grammar: adding prefixes, suffixes or articles, changing tense, or inverting common grammatical structures, Klopstock rectifies and adjusts language until every line, every verse, constitutes its own form/content unity. Sound and sentiment, meter and melody, form and content thus reciprocally in-form each other, oscillating between actively shaping a form and assuming the form of a highly organized situation.

Such oscillation finds its most powerful avatar in Klopstock's idiosyncratic term *Mitausdruck*, the with-expression combining the regulatory capacity of grammar with poetic sentiment. It is worth noticing that *Mitausdruck* is the term Klopstock develops in response to *Ausdruck* (expression) as the formal restriction of language, what the British sentimentalists might have perceived as the “mechanics of sensation.” If *Ausdruck* organizes the grammatical units of language into forms of

expression, *Mitausdruck* organizes the unity of grammar and poetry. Klopstock is less interested in grammar as highly organized system of linguistic units than in grammar as form that shapes poetry from within and vice versa. What this means, finally, for Klopstock, is that sensation is not yet entirely different from form as it may have been for the later British empiricists. In *Mitausdruck*, the long-standing relation between impression, idea, and information takes shape in a single concept, a concept that bridges the gap between the “cold” measurement and “warm” sentiment, between unity and units, between order and impulse, between in-formation and information. This intervention in the history of information has largely been forgotten or ignored. But this reading suggests that an approach to the concept that abandons a nominalist emphasis on the word “information” as such can find in Klopstock, and in the history of literary practice (and its metadiscourse) more generally, a rich history of alternative formations, useful concepts, and critical tools to discover, and to work with toward the understanding of both past and present.

Coda

The problem, Luciano Floridi once wrote, is that we still have to agree about what information is exactly.²²⁵ To pronounce the problem of information as one of agreement and exactitude, this dissertation set out to show, comes with a sacrifice. At the altar of the “omnipresent idol” information, we find ourselves confronted with an information-concept isolated from human cultural, literal, and social practice for the sake of clarity and facticity. While such a theory of information serves many fields of human endeavor unquestionably well, it fails to move those committed to humanistic queries about the nature of information, its history, and the practices surrounding it.

Informational Practices in German Poetry challenges the premises by which we engage with information as a modern concept governing structures of communication, exchange, knowledge, social life, and, not least, literature and culture. The task is bigger than the space of this dissertation. Nevertheless, I hope the work of the chapters has put forward the first important steps towards a humanist theory of information, a theory grounded in the idea that information offers more than its modern incarnation. Choosing as my test case poetic practices follows two considerations: the first, the (sometimes symbolic, sometimes actual) antagonistic role “poetry” takes on vis-à-vis “information” in the twentieth century, and the second, poetry’s long-standing task to intensify and negotiate questions of human practice.

At the center of thinking information, the “information triangle” becomes a barometer of conceptual activity. My goal at the beginning was to show that the mathematical or computational parts of the triangle (storage, transmission, and organization) each finds its analogical counterpart in a poetic practice (memory, communication, and form). Each of the chapters is, thus, organized around a pair of correlated concepts that seems to separate the “informational” from the “poetic”:

²²⁵ Luciano Floridi, “Philosophical Conceptions of Information,” 49.

the first, storage and memory, the second, transmission and communication, and the third, organization and form. Setting out to illustrate the practices shared between the counterparts, the chapters each point us to the traffic between these analogical pairs. Their minor examples (Gibson's conceptual poem "Agrippa," Christian Bök's genetic project *The Xenotext*) each gain their traction from their positioning at the intersections between "information" and "poetry."

Readings of the three major German poets, however, provided a more challenging test case. Ernst Meister, Oswald Egger, and Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock are not, on the surface, invested in the "problem of information" at all—unlike Gibson or Bök, for example, their work shows little engagement with the boundaries separating technological (for Gibson) or scientific (for Bök) from poetic tasks. How then, one might ask, could these poets teach us something about poetry's informational practices? All three, rather than operating within a framework that might justify treating "information" and "poetry" as distinct, develop figures that bridge the gap between each of these correlated pairs. Meister, whose poetry of "containment" challenges the spatial and temporal structures of language, offers us the figure of *Haltsamkeit*; Egger, shifting poetry's focus to the syllable as language's smallest meaningful unit, exercises the tensions underlying *Mitteilung*; Klopstock, developing a new German poetics based on sound, gives us *Mitausdruck*.

The "information triangle," these three figures suggest, cannot be understood as one definitive mode of information practice. *Haltsamkeit* describes both the capacity to store and the ability to remember, *Mitteilung* includes in itself both unity (sharedness) and unit (separation), *Mitausdruck* means both measure and emotional expression. All three figures, that is, prevent us from treating informational practices as existing *outside* of poetic convention (or invention). As they confront poetry with its informational practices, they enact information as poetic concern. And they undo, in their undivided inhabitation of this doubling, the anxiety of paradox, replacing it with a certain admirable contentment.

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Education

Pennsylvania State University	
Ph.D. Comparative Literature	Expected 2017
University of Vienna, Austria	
Mag.phil. (MA), Comparative Literature	2013
University of Vienna, Austria	
Bakk.phil. (BA), Chinese Studies	2010
Beijing Language and Culture University, China	
Study Abroad	2005-06

Publications

Books

Was ist Information? by Peter Janich, trans. with Eric Hayot, U of Minnesota Press, 2018 (in press)
Information: A Reader, Co-Editor; with Jonathan Abel, Anatoly Detwyler, Eric Hayot, and Michele Kennerly, Columbia UP (under contract)

Translations

Buch des Himmels by Q.G. Li, Wien: Letter P, 2012.
“Kunstunterricht,” trans. of “艺术课” by Yan Li 严力. Trialogue Project, Goethe-Institut Washington DC, February 2013.
“Macht den Fußballspieler zum Premierminister,” trans. of “给那个踢球的人当一回总理” by Yang Ke 杨克. Trialogue Project, Goethe-Institut Washington DC, February 2013.
“Mitternachtsgedanken,” trans. of “午夜判断” by Zhai Yongming 翟永明. Trialogue Project, Goethe-Institut Washington DC, February 2013.
“Hahnenkampf,” trans. of “斗鸡” by Cao Zhi 曹植. *Das Reispapier* 2 (2012).
“Stadtlandschaft,” trans. of “城市風景” by Leung Ping-kwan 梁秉鈞. *Das Reispapier* 1 (2011).

Editing

“Graphic Narrative and Global Ground: A Symposium,” Assistant Editor. *International Journal of Comic Art* 13.2 (2011).

Honors and Awards

Rock Ethics Institute Fellow Award	January 2017-May 2017
Center for Humanities and Information Predoctoral Fellowship	August 2015-May 2016
Max Kade Summer Research Award	August 2015
Edwin Erle Sparks Award, The Pennsylvania State University	2012-13