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Monstrous Anatomies

Literary and Scientific Imagination in Britain and
Germany during the Long Nineteenth Century

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Angels and Monsters: On Stifter's *Turmalin*

It was the merit of Walter Benjamin to have evidenced, in a letter addressed to the composer and writer Ernst Schoen dated June 17, 1918, the demonic character of the female protagonists of Adalbert Stifter's novels as a sort of rebellion of nature against the constraints of society.¹ Figures that represent the unexpected, the unforeseeable, the unthinkable, and are monstrous because of this. This interpretation seems particularly *à propos* for the short story *Turmalin* ('Tourmaline', 1853).²

A monster wanders undisturbed in Stifter's literary architecture, and in particular in the underground of the eccentric "House Perron" described in *Turmalin*, whose protagonist is a girl with an abnormally large head.³ The title *Turmalin* refers to a particularly dark mineral, compared with the other stones of Stifter's collection of short stories entitled *Bunte Steine. Ein Festgeschenk* ('Colored Stones. A Holiday Gift', 1853), where it was published. This choice is eloquent. The dark colour of the tourmaline reflects the terror and the gloomy atmosphere of the short story, and the venations of the mineral can also be seen

1 See Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence. 1910–1940*, trans. by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 138.

2 As it is known, an earlier version of *Turmalin* had been published for the first time, with the title *Der Pforter im Herrenhause*, in 1852 in the journal "Libussa". For a comparison between the two versions of the story see Joachim Müller, 'Stifters "Turmalin" – Erzählhaltung und Motivstruktur im Vergleich beider Fassungen', *Vierteljahresschrift des Adalbert Stifter-Instituts*, 17, 1–2 (1968), pp. 33–45. See also: Eva Mason, 'Stifter's "Turmalin": A Reconsideration', *The Modern Language Review*, 72, 2 (1977), pp. 348–358.

3 It is worth remembering that in the 19th century the French scientist Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, in his writing *Philosophie anatomique des monstruosités humaines*, had classified the Hydrocephalus as a subclass of the Macrocephalus, and the latter as an Anomacephalus, in other words as a monster. For a general study on deformity and its perception, see *Monströse Ordnungen*, hrsg. von Achim Geisenhansluecke und Georg Mein (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2009); Birgit Stammberger, *Monster und Freaks. Eine Wissensgeschichte außergewöhnlicher Körper im 19. Jahrhundert* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2011); Maddalena Mazzocut-Mis, *Mostro. L'anomalia e il deforme nella natura e nell'arte* (Milan: Guerini, 1992; new edition, Milan: Guerini, 2012).

as an allusion to the internal stratifications of the plot.⁴ Indeed, in the *incipit* of *Tourmaline*, the author himself advises the reader that the short story is gloomy like the stone at hand. The topics it deals with are gloomy: isolation, pain, death, physical malformation, madness. In fact, to create the atmosphere of the story, Stifter repeatedly avails himself of dark colours. Black is the velvet that borders the portrait of the ‘Madonna with Child’ that hangs on the wall of the room of the protagonist’s apartment.⁵ In the second part of the short story, black is the colour of the jackdaw (which at the beginning is mistaken for a ouzel), which is the only friend in the girl’s tragic existence. The dark basement recalls the dungeons of Gothic literature and it is here that many events in the story take place. It can be reached through a dark red door. In the second part of the short story all the events occur under the sign of darkness and opacity. This marks a contrast with the first part of the story, where the colour white is the dominant note.

There can be no doubt that the basement in which most of the short story’s events take place signals a dimension of mental insanity. The central motif of the story is the obscure pain (infirmity), which infects mind and soul with melancholia. In his introduction to *Turmalin*, Stifter explains how human destiny should be at the centre of the story, highlighting the moment when the light of reason in the protagonist is dimmed, as soon as, in a condition of mental blindness, he abandons its inner law; “when he surrenders utterly to the intensity of his joys and sorrows, loses his foothold” and falls prey to an indefinable condition. In this sense *Turmalin* is a short story about the monstrosity of insanity, as suggested by the *incipit* of this very somber tale, where it is said that:

Es ist darin wie in einem traurigen Briefe zu entnehmen, wie weit der Mensch kömmt, wenn er das Licht seiner Vernunft trübt, die Dinge nicht mehr versteht, von dem innern Gesetze, das ihn unabwendbar zu dem Rechten führt, läßt, sich unbedingt der Innigkeit seiner Freuden und Schmerzen hingibt, den Halt verliert, und in Zustände geräth, die wir uns kaum zu enträthseln wissen.⁶

4 See Lori Wagner, ‘Schick, Schichten, Geschichte. Geological Theory in Stifter’s *Bunte Steine*’, *Vierteljahresschrift des Adalbert Stifter-Instituts*, 2 (1995), pp. 34–36.

5 Interestingly, in Thomas Bernhard’s novel *Auslöschung* (‘Extinction’, 1986) the protagonist mentions a painting of a Madonna with a hydrocephalous Child that was in his parents’ home.

6 Adalbert Stifter, ‘Turmalin’, in *Bunte Steine. Ein Festgeschenk* (Pesth: Verlag von Gustav Heckenast, 1853), vol. 1, p. 195; engl. trans. ‘Tourmaline or the Doorkeeper’, in *Limestone and Other Stories*, trans. and with an Introduction by David Luke (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968), p. 105: “It [Tourmaline] is like a sad letter that tells us to what extremity man may come when he dims the lights of his reason, when he no longer understands life, when he abandons that inner law which is his steadfast guide along the right path, when he surrenders utterly to the intensity of his joys and sorrows, loses his foothold, and is lost in regions of experience which for the rest of us are almost wholly shrouded in mystery”. See Margaret Gump, *Adalbert Stifter* (Boston: Blackwell, 1974), pp. 82–84.

The “solar eclipse” of the mind frees the underground of the soul and the monsters that inhabit it. The doorkeeper in *Turmalin* has abandoned the way of the reason, to walk on a dark and lonely road, taking along his daughter, a girl with an abnormal head. It is easy to see in the silhouette of the girl a monster, in the original sense of the word, attested in Friedrich Kluge's *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*, where the entry “monster” points out to the Latin verb *monere*, i. e. to remember, to advice, a reference to the warning of the Gods against those who abandon the straight and narrow (path).⁷ In this sense the verb *errare* (to wander/to be mistaken, to follow a false way) is evidently a reference to the detour in the underground of the run-down House Perron. It is the underground world from which springs the aggressiveness and emotional violence that Thomas Mann saw hidden in the literary works of Stifter.⁸

The time of the monster

The distant past in which the facts narrated by Stifter take place is lost in the convoluted mists of time. The events are revealed only gradually and are narrated from two perspectives: the main narrator and a friend of his, a woman directly involved in the story. As we read, we become increasingly aware that the inhabitants of Vienna are divided into two groups: the normal ones, who tell stories, and the weird ones, about whom stories are told.⁹

The two reports, which in overlapping compose the short story but come together only late in the narration, are however insufficient to clarify the story entirely. Many of the turning points remain unclear as though shrouded in the obscurity of a mythical time. They seem to take place in the mythical cave mentioned at the end of the first part of the story and seem to totter on the verge of sinking into the abyss of oblivion. Indeed the theme of oblivion emerges as fundamental at the close of the short story. After all oblivion is a central *Leit-*

7 Friedrich Kluge, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011): “Monstrum Sn ‘Ungeheuer’ std. (16. Jh.). Entlehnt aus l. *monstrum* (eigentlich ‘mahnendes Zeichen der Götter durch eine widernatürliche Erscheinung’) zu l. *monere* ‘erinnern, mahnen’; dann verallgemeinert. Selben Ursprungs sind das französische Lehnwort *monströs* und die englische Entlehnung *Monster* (evtl. frz. *monstre*)”. See also: Karl Ernst Georges, ‘Monstrum’, in *Ausführliches lateinisch-deutsches Handwörterbuch* (Hannover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1913), p. 998.

8 See Joachim Müller, ‘Thomas Mann über Adalbert Stifter’, *Vierteljahresschrift des Adalbert Stifter-Instituts*, 12, 1–2 (1963), pp. 60–63, especially p. 59.

9 See Peter Demetz, ‘On Stifter’s and Fontane’s Realism: *Turmalin* and *Mathilde Möhring*’, in *Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. by Joseph P. Strelka (Bern/Frankfurt am Main/New York: Peter Lang, 1985), pp. 767–782.

motiv in Stifter, a result of the lapses in time, of the speed with which memory works and its inevitable blank spots.

In the second part of the short story, many enigmas are solved, yet many remain obscure. Stifter knows that there is no narrative form capable of shaping the formless destiny of a person who has abandoned the path of reason. He also knows that there is no key to the puzzle, no thread capable of definitely knitting together the scattered tatters that composed the original narrative nucleus of the short story.¹⁰

In the light of the *lacunae* that characterize the chronological sequence of Stifter's short story, it might be useful to clarify certain aspects of the tale, i. e. three strange events which happen at different times to the lady of the Viennese bourgeoisie who narrates the second part of the novel: 1) leaning out of the window of her apartment, which is located in a suburb in Vienna, she sees a strange couple walking down the street, just below her window: a middle-aged man, unusually dressed in a way remindful of Goethe's Werther, and, close to him, a young girl, also dressed in an unusual fashion. The girl attracts the attention of passers-by because of her strange head. A head so big as to be almost scary. Her curiosity awoken, the woman goes into the street and starts following them, but soon loses sight of them in the meanders of streets around the church, near a uninhabited building, known in the neighborhood as the "House Perron"; 2) On a full-moon evening, while walking back from the theatre, the woman and her husband hear a weird, uncanny and Dionysian music. It is a strange melody that sounds like a magic flute and seems to come from an apartment of the building that is to be taken down: the House Perron. But the two are unable to discover where the music comes from, and perhaps they are not able to appreciate its unusual character, which goes counter to their expectations. The woman describes it as disquieting and unruly: a strange and indistinct tonality, unsettling yet at the same time almost moving, as if the musicians were trying to convey a suffering, but lacked the adequate media.¹¹ For her husband, the music is simply eccentrically foolish; 3) Some time later the son of the middle-class couple, a well-mannered teenager named Alfred, comes back home extremely frightened. He tells his mother that he has just seen, walking on the sidewalk in front of House Perron, a blackbird (this is another Gothic motif), which looked disoriented. When he had tried to approach and pat it, he had been reproved by a strange person: a girl with an abnormally large head who had popped out of a

10 In his book, which was the first complete study of Stifter's work to appear in English, Eric Blackall notes the numerous narrative gaps in *Turmalin*. See Eric A. Blackall, *Adalbert Stifter. A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, I ed. 1948).

11 These themes highlight also the connections with E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Ritter Gluck* ('Knight Gluck', 1809), Franz Grillparzer's *Der arme Spielmann* ('The Poor Musician', 1847) and Theodor Storm's *Ein stiller Musikant* ('A Quiet Musician', 1875).

window situated at the level of the street, who had told him to leave the animal alone. Frightened by the apparition, he had run off home.

The central role of the mysteries and the moments of ominous suspense in *Turmalin* reinforce the Gothic atmosphere. The three events, described in the woman's first person narrative which makes up the second part of the story, represent three tesserae of a complex mosaic, which is not fully evident in the novel. There is no thread that can knit together and mend the lacerated memory or the secrets that spark human life. But one thing we know: the three tesserae all lead to House Perron, i. e. to the home of the monster.¹²

The home of the monster

Differently from other works by Stifter set in the Austrian countryside, the background in which the events narrated in *Turmalin* take place is the metropolitan dimension of Vienna. This is no accident: according to Stifter the city is the typical place of disorder and dispersion. As one reads in the collection of essays *Wien und die Wiener* ('Vienna and the Viennese', 1841–1844), Stifter underlines, anticipating the later critique, the dimension of alienation and inhumanity that characterized the life of the metropolis. As we read at the beginning of the story *Turmalin*, the city of Vienna is also marked out, according to Stifter, by the eccentricity of its inhabitants. In *Turmalin* the male leading character is also the protagonist of a 'changement'. At the beginning of the short story the protagonist is a strange pensioner, but later in life, he becomes a typical 'Sonderling' and works as a doorkeeper and a busker. After his wife tells him she has been unfaithful and then decides to disappear, he himself is transformed from loving father into an eccentric misfit, a socially marginalized person. Stifter describes the protagonist of the first part of the short story as a man who is unable to come to terms with reality and with his suffering, a man destined to social failure and marginality.¹³ He has abandoned his apartment in the centre of Vienna, to go into exile with his daughter in the suburbia. The new lodgings are inhospitable and unhealthy: the basement of an old building in the outskirts of town. It is in this non-place, underneath House Perron, that the nameless girl has been growing up for some years, in an uncivilized, dirty, damp room, that is bad

12 See Lee Byron Jennings, *The Ludicrous Demon. Aspects of the Grotesque in German Post-Romantic Prose* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1963), pp. 109–115.

13 See Hans Esselborn, 'Adalbert Stifters "Turmalin". Die Absage an den Subjektivismus durch das naturgesetzliche Erzählen', *Vierteljahresschrift des Adalbert Stifter-Instituts*, 34, 1–2 (1985), pp. 9–14.

for her health. House Perron is a place of darkness, of the uncanny. It is a building destined to be demolished, and almost empty at the time of the events.

The building is described by the woman narrator in the second part of the short story. For the first time in her life she had entered the “haunted palace” with the aim of returning a book to a family friend, named professor Andorf. Since the man was not at home, she had left the book with a strange man who presented himself as the doorkeeper of the building. This spectral man is the only other lodger of House Perron, along with professor Andorf. Through the perception of the woman, we are made aware of the decadent atmosphere that characterizes the building. As we read in *Turmalin*, on the external walls people see the record of the “gradual decline and decay and dissolution” of things. One also sees “wie die Vögel und andere Thiere nach und nach von dem Mauerwerke Besitz nahmen, aus dem sich die Menschen zurück gezogen hatten”.¹⁴

The description evokes the image of a haunted castle typical of the Gothic literature: a ruined scenario where the most sordid and primitive instincts of human beings emerge.

The transformation of the male protagonist in the course of the short story is paralleled by the contrast – which is also interesting from a social topography perspective – between House Perron and his previous apartment, which is on the fourth floor of a building in the centre of Vienna, on Sanct Petersplatz, where the pensioner lived with his wife and his daughter before the betrayal.

The apartment in the centre of the city is visited in the short story before and after the traumatic event that sparks the pensioner’s latent insanity. Few writers are capable of conveying with Stifter’s efficacy the entanglement between the locations, the objects and the psychological dimension. In Stifter’s poetics the description of the places translates into a metonymic depiction of the characters who live there.¹⁵

In the transgression of the conventional order, an important role is played by two chronologically far apart descriptions of the rented apartment in the centre of Vienna, by details and by the objects of the house (some of them are prophetic, since they are related to forthcoming events). In the first description of the apartment, we are struck by the so-called “room of heroes”: it is the showroom where the pensioner, who is a *connoisseur* of the fine arts, indulges in his disquieting passion: a collection of the portraits of important persons. Faces crowd the walls of this strange private collection: paintings of “heroes” (monsters of perfection in every learning field), which the pensioner has hung on the

14 Stifter, ‘Turmalin’, p. 229; engl. trans. ‘Tourmaline’, p. 124: “birds and other kind of animals gradually taking possession of the wall, from which the people had withdrawn”.

15 See Gunther Hertling, “‘Wer jetzt kein Haus hat, baut sich keines mehr’”. Zur Zentralsymbolik in A. Stifters *Turmalin*, *Vierteljahresschrift des Adalbert Stifter-Instituts*, 26, 1–2 (1977), pp. 17–34. See, in particular, pp. 17–23.

walls to gaze on them at his leisure. To better study the portraits, he has furnished the sofas with wheels that allow him to move himself in all directions, to survey the whole room, and to achieve different observation points. Thus he satisfies his desire for a panoptic dominion on the totality of the world of the heroes. An attitude which, together with the collection, reveals his anxiety over losing his possessions. However, anticipating future events, the centre of this room is occupied by the so-called "Dall's armchair" (Dall being the actor who becomes his wife's lover).¹⁶

The wife's rooms are described using a kind of "duplication through difference":¹⁷ a place whose centre is assigned to the white cradle of the couple's daughter. The narrator notes the rosy cheeks and delicate features of the baby, who, in these lines, is reduced to yet another object of the house, ready to be entered into an inventory. The whole apartment embodies the idea of 'order': a perfectly clean and tidy place, an embalmed family atmosphere, the hallmark of the bourgeois world. When, in the uncanny duplication of the second description, the apartment of Sanct Petersplatz is observed by the eye of the same narrator, after the break of the harmonic order, it is the state of decay (*Zerfall*) that prevails. The space of the house, whose interiors are again scrutinized, appears the same as before yet different. The objects in the apartment are covered by a layer of dust, while spiders and moths have taken possession of the house. The domestic bliss evoked by the rosy color of the baby's cheeks is gone. The baby was protected by the veils of the cradle and a golden angel statuette but now the spiders move about suggesting the anxiety of loss. Everything in the house suggests a regression to an animal condition and ultimately to death.¹⁸ The decadence of the house parallels the moral and social degradation of the pensioner, the loss of harmony and the stifling pall of depression. The man's unstable mental balance has been definitely compromised by the traumatic events he has undergone.

The contrast between the two aspects of the house – the apparent well-ordered harmony and the decadent condition described later – introduces the motif of the *descensus ad inferos* in the second part of the short story. After the departure of his wife, the pensioner wants to vanish from the face of the earth. He moves with his daughter to a miserable and inhospitable subterranean lodging, under

16 On the role of this character, see Hans Kristian, 'Adalbert Stifters "Turmalin" in seinen Beziehungen zur Selbstbiographie des Burgschauspielers Joseph Lange', *Vierteljahresschrift des Adalbert Stifter-Instituts*, 12 (1963), pp. 146–150.

17 See Marino Freschi, 'Turmalin: la pietra dello scandalo di Stifter', preface to the Italian edition of *Turmalin*, ed. by Emilia Fiandra (Venice: Marsilio, 1990), pp. 9–33.

18 On the animal nature of human beings, see Stifter's essay *Zuversicht* ('Confidence', 1846), in *Werke und Briefe. Historisch-Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, hrsg. von Johannes John und Sibylle von Steinsdorff (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2003), vol. 3,1, pp. 83–92.

the building known as House Perron, far from the elegant centre of the city. The pensioner turns aside the main street and locks himself in a vault in suburbs, marginalizing himself and the daughter physically and symbolically from the normal world of the Vienna bourgeoisie.

He survives working as a strolling musician and as the doorkeeper of House Perron. The apartment, chosen by the pensioner as a prison-refuge for himself and his daughter (whose name remains unknown), is like a cave in a hill destined to be destroyed. A degraded underground habitation, where – enacting the metropolitan legend mentioned in the first part of the short story – the pensioner has hidden along with his daughter. Darkness, dirtiness, poverty, humidity, malnutrition characterize the surroundings and accompany the insanity of the inhabitants. And it is this unsound environment that probably causes the hydrocephalic illness of the daughter, as we are told in the second part of the story.

The body of the monster

The undisputed protagonist of the second part of the short story is the girl during her adolescence. The character owes much to the poetics of E.T.A. Hoffmann¹⁹ but it has also some elective affinities with other characters invented by Stifter: Pia in *Narrenburg* ('Castle Crazy', 1843), the brunette in *Katzensilber* ('Muscovite', 1845–53), Juliana in *Waldbrunnen* ('Forest Fountain', 1866). The girl is certainly an eccentric presence in Stifter's works compared to the other young and beautiful protagonists and heroes of *Bunte Steine*. This eccentricity is not solely tied to her deformity but extends to her personality. The protagonist of *Turmalin* is not a person capable of pursuing her objectives, but a sick girl, who must trust in adults, while searching to escape the dead end in which she has been trapped by the adults she trusts. As we discover progressively, she has spent a lot of time in the underground room, with a jackdaw as her only companion and bread and water as her only food. The girl is worn-out by the oppressive melancholy of the father, a defeated human being who personifies the pitfalls of the Romantic outlook and its rejection of reason. As his music reveals, he has been unable to contain his pain, to elaborate it. Instead of it, he has accentuated its disruptive and dissonant effects – in other words: the dark powers of sentiments.

He transfers his internal infirmity to his daughter, the malformed head functioning as a sort of projected psychosomatic illness. Stifter emphasizes the monstrosity of the girl by contrasting it with her aspect as a baby. In her white

19 This affinity is pointed out also by Rudolf Gottschall in 'Adalbert Stifter. Ein Essay', *Unsere Zeiten. Deutsche Revue der Gegenwart. Monatsschrift zum Conversation-Lexikon. Neue Folge*, 4, 1 (1868), pp. 745–766, particularly p. 759.

gown, the baby had been described as a little angel with small red lips, rosy cheeks, her little eyes confidently shut. Now she has become a monster with an abnormal head: a face to scare the people and catalyze the attentions of the “good Samaritans”. The girl’s deformation is the irradiating nucleus of the second part of the story: her awful and frighteningly large face (“ein fürchterlich großes Angesicht ... erschreckend groß”), together with her pallor and her disquieting, fixed and unexpressive gaze. Her eyes seem to belong to a soulless automaton. Her empty gaze evokes her suffering and stands as a silent accusation against her father.

She is certainly one of the most helpless figures in Stifterian fiction: the innocent expiator of her father’s faults. Locked in the underground basement, in a prison that shuts her off from life, the girl carries on herself the marks of her suffering.²⁰ The forced isolation from all human contacts compounds the lack of food and heat, and induces a regression into a *quasi* bestial condition. In the absence of human affection, the girl develops a pathological tie to the jackdaw, her only friend. A stranger to humanity, it is only at the animal level that she finds comfort.

The language of the monster

While the squalid underground lodging described by Stifter through the eyes of the woman narrator is remindful of the underworld in Jean Paul’s *Die unsichtbare Loge* (‘The Invisible Lodge’, 1793), there are also many motifs which were to resurface, many years later, in Franz Kafka’s works: from the idea of “living in a hole” in *Der Bau* (‘The Burrow’, 1923) to the dirty bedroom where Gregor Samsa in *Die Verwandlung* (‘The Metamorphosis’, 1915) shuts himself with cooperation of his family.²¹

Like Kafka’s protagonists, the girl in *Turmalin* also undergoes a regression towards a non-human world. While in the first part of the short story, the symbolic custodian of the baby had been the golden statue of the angel, in the second part Stifter entrusts the role to the domesticated jackdaw, the girl’s only friend. Only to the animal can the girl speak, and she speaks in a demonic language, which is at the same time poetic and unintelligible to human ears. The jackdaw in reply nods its head and answers with sounds which are similarly incomprehensible to humans. It

20 As in Stifter’s *Abdias* and particularly the character of Ditha, the blind girl.

21 See Naomi Ritter, ‘Stifter und Kafka: Berührungspunkte’, *VASILO* 27 (1978), pp. 129–136 and Stefan Gradmann, *Topographie/Text. Zur Funktion räumlicher Modellbildung in den Werken von Adalbert Stifter und Franz Kafka* (Berlin: Hain, 1990). W.G. Sebald too emphasizes the affinities between the two writers in *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks. Zur österreichischen Literatur von Stifter bis Handke* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2006, I ed. 1985), p. 17–18 and p. 37.

is significant that when the girl finally escapes from her underground prison, she brings along, as mementos of that archaic world, the jackdaw and her father's magic flute, that is to say the two 'embodiments' of her private language and her mythical dimension.

With a sadistic cruelty that only such followers of Stifter like Franz Kafka and Thomas Bernhard were able to recognize in their parents, the pensioner had assigned to his daughter the macabre task of describing a scenario of pain and suffering:

Beschreibe den Augenblick, wenn ich todt auf der Bahre liegen werde, und wenn sie mich begraben [...]. So beschreibe, wie deine Mutter von ihrem Herzen gepeinigt in der Welt herumirrt, wie sie sich nicht zurück getraut, und wie sie in der Verzweiflung ihrem Leben ein Ende macht.²²

The writings of the girl, which after the father's death fall in the hands of the woman narrator, are themselves monstrous: gruesome notebooks, which in a highly poetical style strive to convey the pain but lack adequate artistic means and show little signs of reason beyond the superficial correctness of the sentences. An empty art, marked by the absence of any profound rationality, which evokes the atmosphere of Gothic literature.

When the narrating I of the second part of the short story reads the writings of the girl, she perceives their poetic strength, but deems their contents utterly incomprehensible, completely mystifying:

Ich würde sie Dichtungen nennen, wenn Gedanken in ihnen gewesen wären, oder wenn man Grund, Ursprung und Verlauf des Ausgesprochenen hätte enträthseln können. Von einem Verständnisse, was Tod, was Umirren in der Welt und sich aus Verzweiflung das Leben nehmen heiße, war keine Spur vorhanden, und doch war dieses alles der trübselige Inhalt der Ausarbeitungen. Der Ausdruck war klar und bündig, der Satzbau richtig und gut, und die Worte, obwohl sinnlos, waren erhaben.²³

The middle-class lady does not understand that poetry can exist also in the absence of order and understanding. According to the woman, the girl seems to have found joy in these artistic pursuits, which she is skilled at, yet whose significance

22 Stifter, 'Turmalin', cit, p. 258; engl. trans. 'Tourmaline', p. 141: "Describe how one day I shall lie dead in my coffin [...] describe how your mother wanders about the world in the torment of her heart, and how she dare not return, and how in the end she does away with herself in despair".

23 Stifter, 'Turmalin', pp. 263–264; engl. trans. 'Tourmaline', p. 195: "I should call them stories or poems if they had contained any intelligible thought or if there had been any discernible rhyme or reason or continuity in the text. There was not a trace of any understanding of the meaning of death, or of wandering about in the world and doing away with oneself in despair, and yet these melancholy themes were the sole content of the girl's writing. Her expressions were clear and incisive, her sentences correct and well constructed, and her words, although senseless, were noble and lofty sublime".

seem to escape her. The same is true for the words she utters: interviewed by the woman, the hydrocephalic girl answers in the purest literary language, but what she says is almost incomprehensible. Weird sentences come out of her mouth, different from the ones normally found in everyday interactions. The language of the young girl is poetic, but abnormal, compared to ordinary communication.²⁴ It is the verbal equivalent of her physical anomaly and it compounds her alienation from the normal world.

It could not be otherwise. On the one hand the girl, in her primitiveness, represents the power and the demonic forces of the imagination, as a kind of knowledge which cannot be totally translated into a form. The poetic language, which precedes logical understanding, refers to itself and resists transparency, remarks its intelligible and transitive aspects. The opacity of poetry evokes the sensitive and intransitive character of representation: the poetry does not reproduce the world but produces it.²⁵ On the other hand, the girl is the perfect representative of the chaotic world of the story. In her monstrous silhouette (large head and starred eyes) she is the paradigm of deformity and obscurity. There is no doubt: through the character of the hydrocephalous girl, Stifter intends to offer a negative view of Romantic poetry, as a kind of artistic temperament that requires a distance from the normal world, which flourishes in solitude, illness, insanity and suffering.

Stifter's reservations on the Romantic tradition are expressed also through the representation of her father. The pensioner significantly dies falling from a ladder on which he had climbed to look at the lights of the external world. Through the death of the father – a typical incarnation of the 'Sonderling' of Romanticism²⁶ – Stifter signals the fate of the Romantic literary movement and the final fall as its necessary outcome.

The metamorphosis of the monster

Paradoxically it is the enacting of the expected ending, the death of the father, that brings the girl back to life and restores to her the potential future she had been denied. The old world must die for her to rise from the dead. This signals also the acceptance of an extreme, amoral art.²⁷ It was the desire for light, for a

24 See Enrico De Angelis, *Dal mito al progetto. Note su Adalbert Stifter* (Pisa: SEU, 1986), pp. 125–130. According to De Angelis, in this story Stifter delineates two kinds of communication, and the second is the poetic one.

25 See Jennings, *The Ludicrous Demon*, pp. 109–115.

26 See Hans Geulen, 'Stifterische Sonderlinge', *Jahrbuch der deutschen Schillergesellschaft*, 17 (1973), pp. 415–431.

27 See Isolde Schiffermüller, 'Kunst und Wahnsinn in Adalbert Stifters *Turmalin*. Zur figura-

glimpse of the external world that had led the father to scramble up the ladder, trying to reach the window-port hole.²⁸ And his accidental fall is the turning point in Tourmaline's unhappy life. It allows for the opening of the little dark red door, almost black with dirt, of the basement, and her emergence into life. But, when the girl re-emerges from the underworld – like the slaves in Plato's cave –, she exposes to the world her oversized head and her strange gaze. The anomaly of her head signals the heredity of her parent's chaotic and disturbed way of life.

From this point of view the girl, who shows evident autistic symptoms, seems close to the character of Kaspar Hauser in the homonymous 1832 book by Anselm von Feuerbach.²⁹ The girl, as well as the foundling from Nuremberg, who lived also for several years inside a dungeon, embodies the enigma of life and its alterity. There is one event that transforms her from a deprived automaton into a feeling human being: the tears she sheds when she experiences the frailty of the human dimension at the death of her father. The liminal experience of death, which the young girl has always explored through her writings, becomes here the driving force in her metamorphosis. Like Gustav in Jean Paul's *Unsichtbare Loge*, at the beginning the girl does not understand the meaning of the verb "to die".³⁰ But then, as she experiences it through her father and comes to understand it, a new life starts for her. As the woman narrator tells us at the moment of her father's death: "Da fing es heftig zu weinen an, ich suchte es zu trösten, aber meine Worte verfangen nichts".³¹ That the woman's words have no power is not simply due to the suffering but to the fact that the language of the woman is "other": it is the language of rationality and not the girl's poetry one. For this reason the sublime writings of the girl appear to the lady as cryptic texts, remote from her own conventions just like the melody of his father's flute.

tiven Praxis der Erzählung', *Quaderni di Lingue e Letterature dell'Università di Verona*, 19 (1994), pp. 217–229.

28 The ladder, which in the previous life had been used by the pensioner to closely examine the faces of the heroes in his private collection is, in the second part, barely high enough to allow him to look out of the basement from a window at street level: "Da sah ich die Säume von Frauenkleidern vorbei gehen, sah die Stiefel von Männern, sah schöne Spitzen von Rocken oder die vier Füße eines Hundes. Was an den jenseitigen Häusern vorging, war nicht deutlich", Stifter, 'Turmalin', p. 259; engl. trans., 'Tourmaline', p. 141: "I could see the hems of women's dresses going past, and I saw men's boots or fine coattails or the four feet of a dog. I could not make out what was happening by the houses on the other side of the street".

29 See Müller, 'Stifters "Turmalin"', p. 41. See Eugen Geulen, 'Adalbert Stifters Kinder-Kunst', in *Der imaginierte Findling. Studien zu Kaspar-Hauser-Rezeption*, hrsg. von Ulrich Struve (Heidelberg: Winter, 1995), pp. 123–143.

30 For a comparison between the two writers, see Beatrice Mall-Grob, *Fiktion des Anfangs. Literarische Kindheitsmodelle bei Jean Paul und Adalbert Stifter* (Stuttgart/Weimar: Metzler, 1999), pp. 360–371.

31 Stifter, 'Turmalin', p. 254; engl. trans. 'Tourmaline', pp. 138–139: "At this she began to weep bitterly. I tried to comfort her, but my words had no effect [...]".

The death of the father is a breakthrough that puts the girl again in contact with the community, but she pays a price, renouncing her creativity, her poetry and her freedom. Since the death of the father, with the benevolent woman as tutor, the girl undertakes a re-educational path, which the woman defines as transforming that fragmentary and abnormal expression into harmonious and logical thoughts. In other words, the woman intends to *reshape* the girl making her again capable to integrate herself into the normal world, to educate her as a useful member of the community. We are told that the girl begins to conform to the regularities of an ordered life, imposed on her by her educators. In fact, the lady admits in passing that the girl has to be brought into society through gentle means, leaving her the illusion of freedom. Not so differently from Kafka, Stifter reveals in this passage how an illusion of freedom is all that is allowed to the middle-class.³²

As we know from the ending of the short story, time and her new well-ordered life have also a beneficial effect on her abnormality. When asked about the hydrocephalitis, the doctor explains the swelling of the head as a glandular affection due to the dampness of the basement she was living in. He recommends thermal treatment with iodine water and a healthy lifestyle until the head returns to normal. The cure succeeds and after some time the head becomes smaller and with more regular and more pliable traits. From a realistic point of view there is, of course, no medical and scientific explanation for this kind of recovery or for the connection between the strange hydrocephalitis and Tourmaline's lifestyle. The malformation can be understood only symbolically, insofar as the monster represents always a menace for the normally and orderly standard of life. The recovery means that the lady had successfully changed the head of the girl.

The metamorphosis of the girl's face is paralleled by the transformation of the town over the years, which involves House Perron and the surrounding buildings. Along with the characters who occupied the story, the old house also disappears as it is demolished, and new buildings take its place. The town's face also changes.³³ Through his description of the new topographic order, Stifter expresses the passing of the time, the mutability of human passions, the forgetfulness that characterizes the new generations, who know nothing of House Perron and the events associated with it. Tourmaline's story has been replaced by other ones, buried under stratification of new houses, people, lives, memories. Yet the tourmaline is a stone, a stone that can lie hidden under the flowers and the

32 See Demetz, *On Stifter's and Fontane's Realism*, p. 775.

33 The connection between the body of the monster and the city plays an important role also in the novel of Honoré de Balzac *La Fille aux yeux d'or* ('The Girl with the Golden Eyes', 1834–35).

grass. While these wither, the stones are capable of resisting the passing of time and the upheavals of geology.

Houses may fall down, people go away, but one can still remember those who once lived there. And this is after all what characterizes the whole of Stifter's works: the attempt to crystallize time.