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Adalbert Stifter oder Diese fürchterliche Wendung der Dinge: Biographie by Wolfgang Matz (review)

Pamela S. Saur

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Reviews

Wolfgang Matz, *Adalbert Stifter oder Diese fürchterliche Wendung der Dinge: Biographie*. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2016. 391 pp.

A bibliographic search for Wolfgang Matz's book *Adalbert Stifter oder Diese fürchterliche Wendung der Dinge: Biographie*, will yield two results a 1995 volume published by Carl Hanser Verlag and an edition brought out by Wallstein Verlag over twenty years later, in 2016. The first version is not mentioned on the newer book's cover or front matter, but it is acknowledged by the author in an appendix section, "Nachwort zur Neuausgabe," and in the book jacket blurb, which runs, "Die 'ausgezeichnete Biografie' (*Die Zeit*) erscheint hier in einer gründlich überarbeiteten und erweiterten Neuausgabe."

Throughout the 2016 book, minor changes have been made to improve clarity, sharpen emphasis, and streamline style. These include changes at the level of word choice, sentence construction, and punctuation. From time to time a clause or sentence is added or omitted. Organization is improved by changes in paragraph breaks and inclusion of new subtitles. In particular, the titles of several literary works have been added as subtitles of chapters identifying phases of Stifter's life, thus more closely tying together the book's dual biographical and literary chronologies. Larger changes are identified in the "Nachwort": "Mehrere Abschnitte wurden deutlich erweitert, besonders die zur Französischen Revolution und zu der Erzählung *Zuversicht*, sowie die Darstellung zu Stifters letzter Erzählung *Aus der bairischen Walde*. Der Rang der *Nachkommenschaften* ist mir tatsächlich erst spät aufgegangen" (367). The author notes that the book's bibliography is selective and not significantly expanded in the second edition. Indeed, only four sources published after 1995 are listed. The book's revisions and expanded discussions offer some new ma-

terial, but mainly they reflect the author's attempts to rethink and more cogently express the ideas developed in the first edition.

Both versions, of course, emphasize Stifter's meditations on personal loneliness, resignation, and failure; on the power and destructiveness of nature; and on mysteries of fate and the cosmos. Highlighted are paradoxes in Stifter's life and oeuvre, reflected in several provocative phrases. These include the title, a quotation from one of Stifter's stories, "Diese fürchterliche Wendung der Dinge"; the new edition's opening motto by Paul Valéry, "Zwei Gefahren bedrohen unaufhörlich die Welt: die Ordnung und die Unordnung"; and the haunting title of its final chapter, "In die weiße Finsternis," a phrase from the well-known story "Bergkristall," in which children get lost in a blizzard. With deep insight into the man and his writings as well as empathy for Stifter's sorrows, depressions, and dark moods, Matz traces the course of Stifter's life and writings against a backdrop of contrasting beauty and idealism and dark pessimism and bleakness. The political turmoil of Stifter's age and the misfortunes of his life, including family and financial troubles, and his psychological and literary reactions to them, despite his successes, provide Matz's readers with an understanding of the often troubled phases of Stifter's life that culminated in his ghastly suicide by cutting his own throat.

In the 2016 book here under review, Matz skillfully integrates Stifter's factual and psychological biography with chronological discussions of his fictional works; as a result, the book is smooth, unified, and compelling. A generally convincing and thorough portrait of Stifter is drawn, supported by pertinent references to his fiction. His works contain real landscapes and places as well as his traces of his experiences of revolution and political instability, lost love, and financial and marital difficulties, including childlessness. His own emotional turmoil and swings from idealism and hope to resignation and despair also infuse his writings. In addition to identifying straightforward influences of Stifter's real life in his fiction, Matz also refers to the author's contrasting expressive strategy of reacting to negative experiences by transforming them into positive ones in his fiction. Matz often refers to passages creating such mirror images as "wishes" or "wish fulfillment" in which beautiful and idealized places, people, relationships and situations are often labeled "utopian." To cite one memorable example, in *Der Waldbrunnen* Stifter names a character Juliane and places her in a fairy tale-like story with a happy ending: She is an intelligent and loving Roma girl who acquires European civilization and

marries a fine man of high social station. The real Juliane is Stifter's niece and foster daughter. According to Matz this girl reportedly endured years of abuse, including overwork, beatings, and starvation, at the hands of Stifter's wife Amalia. On her second disappearance from home, the runaway commits suicide by drowning. Relating this terrible event, Matz refers to the words of the biography's title: "Stifter war wie vernichtet. Diese Wendung der Dinge war fürchterlicher als alles, was ihm bisher begegnet war" (304).

Throughout this biography, Matz connects Stifter's life and writings—both of which he knows very well—and offers insights, albeit brief and selective, into a great many, in fact most, of Stifter's works. His use of material from Stifter's life to interpret his literary creation recalls the tradition of "biographical" literary criticism, which is often maligned as naive and simplistic. However, Matz's purpose is in large part the opposite of "biographical" criticism, namely using details from Stifter's fiction to contribute to interpretation of his life. In concluding remarks, Matz comments on his project: "Denn eine Faktensammlung ist ja noch keine Biographie [. . .] Erst die Beziehungen zwischen Individualität und äußerer Wirklichkeit in der Lebenswelt, zwischen Besonderem und Allgemeinem im Inneren der Menschen, erst die Darstellung dieses komplexen, tausendfältigen Gefüges könnte etwas wie die Zeichnung einer Existenz ergeben, die mehr wäre als Vorwand für einen Text" (370).

Pamela S. Saur
Lamar University

Pamela S. Saur, *The Spiritual Meaning of Material Things in the Novels of Adalbert Stifter (1805–1868): A Study in Poetic Realism*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2015. 212 pp.

At the center of Pamela S. Saur's monograph on the Austrian author Adalbert Stifter is an interest in "the complex ways in which abstract virtues, ideals, and spiritual elements coexist with the concrete world of the earth, substances, and things" (5). Contemporary literary history acknowledges a strong attempt at balance in the works of German Realism, which was frequently referred to as "Idealrealismus" by Stifter's contemporaries. Indeed, Stifter is progressively understood by literary scholars as an author who epitomizes a