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Wolf and the Role of Nature in the *Mörike-Lieder*

John Williamson (Liverpool)

From time to time Hugo Wolf's letters to Frieda Zerny slip into a language of nature that is no less clichéd for being completely sincere. It may be in the context of reproach, as Wolf compares «God, the sun, the stars...the idea, the creative principle, the never-resting spirit, the whole universe» with Frieda's love of trivialities.¹ Tossed on storms, afflicted by lightening, he gradually relaxes into a melancholy sense of separation while sitting with one of her letters in a garden «under the shadow of a splendid chestnut tree». He writes in short like many another man in love while offering ample proof of the statement by one of his editors that «The whole man seems to have been profoundly dependent on the events of nature, for the sun, flowers, and the state of the weather are perpetually recurring themes.»² Yet Wolf was seldom touched by verbal eloquence when he surveyed natural phenomena. Simple pathetic fallacy causes him to compare the mist that shrouded «the whole splendid neighbourhood of Matzen» to «a picture of despair».³ A journey from Rosenheim to Salzburg is described flatly as «the most magnificent mountain panorama».⁴ In Mainz he notes the Rhine in the foreground and possibly the Vosges in the background but proclaims no more enthusiasm than a tourist.⁵ Other comments prove all too clearly that the English are not unique in their enthusiasm for recounting the details of the weather (and above all of rain, which is an ever-recurring source of frustration to Wolf's love of walking). Yet it is clear even from the hackneyed verbal responses that Wolf was strongly affected by natural phenomena to the extent of their casting a shadow over his creativity; how did this Nietzschean disciple of the sun who feared the inclement elements respond with such conviction to the «*Lied vom Winde*»? In 1896 he bemoans to Hugo Faisst the effect of the Viennese climate on his health as he marked time working on the more mechanical aspects of *Der Corregidor* and waiting for the renewed impulse to work on the *Italienisches Liederbuch*.⁶

1 Ernst Hilmar and Walter Obermaier, *Hugo Wolf: Briefe an Frieda Zerny*, Vienna: Musikwissenschaftlicher Verlag, 1978, p. 12.

2 Franz Grasberger (ed.), *Hugo Wolf: Briefe an Melanie Köchert*, Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 1964, p. xix.

3 Joachim Draheim (ed.), *Hugo Wolf: Briefe an Hugo Faisst*, Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 1996, p. 116.

4 *Briefe an Frieda Zerny*, p. 23.

5 *Briefe an Melanie Köchert*, p. 26.

6 *Briefe an Hugo Faisst*, p. 162.

In general, nature only moved Wolf to verbal extravagance or eloquence where some element of human emotion or even tragedy could be illuminated. To Melanie Köchert he described the «hallowed» grave of Heinrich von Kleist «near a moderately large tree,...overgrown with ivy» during «a marvellous atmosphere at half past five, the blood-red sun setting through the thinly scattered pine-trees, beyond the glistening Havel, which here expanded to a lake, and all around desolation, deep silence.»⁷ In particular, at the point where literature and nature meet Wolf often rises to the challenge of description with greater enthusiasm: a fine day can move him to quote «himmlischer Kälte balsamsüße Luft» from the first poem of «Auf eine Christblume» and lead to plans for nocturnal excursions.⁸ Trips through landscapes of mountain and lake were a particular source of distraction to him in fine weather.⁹ Nature in these moods can lead him to dwell on the smallness of man in the face of mountain and glacier but also to a humanization of nature in the persona of «Frau Sonne», as though from the pages of *Götterdämmerung*.¹⁰ Wolf resembles his contemporary Gustav Mahler in his love of Alpine landscape and his sense of the unity of nature, but like Mahler, he instinctively makes comparisons with nature captured in the work of art. Mahler set the birds and the animals in his Third Symphony while dead ravens were hung outside his summer-house to warn others away; while composing Act II of *Der Corregidor*, Wolf shoots dead an offending finch and then buries it furtively in the forest in a mood of guilt and oppression.¹¹ As with many a Romantic artist, the changing of seasons or the dusk is the time for his most overt sympathizing with nature. Autumnal melancholy brings out the sentimental side in Wolf's character in «the bluest heaven and the most golden sunshine.»¹² He can easily dispense with the beauties of nature, however, in spite of the occasional note of regret if there is an opera to be written; indeed the sun's rays can be enough to provoke musical inspirations.¹³

A particularly striking passage occurs in a letter to Emil Kauffmann of 26 April 1893. The description of a «wonderful spring» touches greater heights of eloquence than usual, and involves a passage that seems strangely familiar. He refers to an «oddly blue sky, this continual germinating and

7 *Briefe an Melanie Köchert*, p. 87.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 94.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 112.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 120 and p. 122.

11 Natalie Bauer-Lechner, *Recollections of Gustav Mahler*, trans. Dika Newlin, ed. Peter Franklin, London: Faber, 1980, pp. 56–7; *Briefe an Melanie Köchert*, p. 140.

12 *Briefe an Melanie Köchert*, pp. 153–4.

13 *Ibid.*, pp. 158 and 165.

sprouting in nature, these flattering breezes, pregnant by spring sun and scent of flowers, this «I long and after what I know not» but notes that it drives him mad and that spring has played a trick on him.¹⁴ He alone cannot produce anything. That he has written in the letter a kind of parody of «Er ist's» is not the least obvious sign of his exasperation. The sense that the season and element that he had hymned has particularly betrayed him is a barely unspoken part of the letter. Wolf's relationship with nature hovers on the verge of the pathetic fallacy at the best and the worst of times. His method of expressing his feelings is most engaged when he resorts to conscious or unconscious literary paraphrase.

With a composer whose output is so dominated by settings of the word, it is difficult to separate Wolf's perceptions of nature from those of the authors that he chose to set. Recent work in this area has most obviously settled on Eichendorff.¹⁵ Yet there is a case for saying that Wolf responded less strongly than either Robert Schumann or Hans Pfitzner to Eichendorff's nature poetry. His settings of Goethe are richer in natural imagery, but the Mörike collection goes even further in its appropriation of the details and the spirit of natural life.

Of fifty-three poems by Mörike set by Wolf only six can be said to be without direct reference to some feature of the natural world: «Gebet», «An den Schlaf», «Lebe wohl», «Auftrag», «Bei einer Trauung», and «Selbstverständnis». To these might be added «Seufzer», for the preoccupation with the elements of fire and ice in the Latin original is diluted to the vanishing-point of a compound noun in Mörike's translation, and «Abschied», whose reference to shadow is clearly personal rather than evocative of twilight. It might also be added that «An den Schlaf» deals with a state of nature, but it handles it without descriptive detail.

Otherwise, Wolf's selection overflows with natural images. Among these settings are a further seven that are preoccupied with the interpretation of nature to man, either through direct invocation of nature's creator¹⁶ or the image of the cross and other elements of religion¹⁷. More immediate reflection of nature takes the form of times and seasons in no less than twenty

14 Edmund Hellmer (ed.), *Briefe Hugo Wolfs an Emil Kauffmann*, Berlin: S. Fischer, 1903, pp. 90–1.

15 Ute Ringhandt, «Der Ton der schönen Natur: Hugo Wolfs Eichendorff-Vertonung *Nachtzauber*», in: *Musik-Konzepte 75: Hugo Wolf*, ed. Heinz-Klaus Metzger and Rainer Riehn, Munich: Edition Text+Kritik, 1992, pp. 67–82.

16 «Fussreise», «Auf eine Christblume I», «Zum neuen Jahr».

17 «Auf ein altes Bild», «Karwoche», «Wo find ich Trost», and the bells of «In der Frühe».

poems¹⁸. Celestial bodies feature in a further intersecting group of sixteen poems¹⁹.

Landscape is well represented both in its natural forms (twenty-two poems)²⁰ and its cultivated state (at least four)²¹, sometimes in the same poem (also four)²². Plant life is specifically mentioned in a further group of twenty one in total²³, as are birds in thirteen poems²⁴, insects in a smaller group of five²⁵, assorted animals in eight poems, mostly involving horses²⁶, reptiles (a mere one)²⁷, and fish (three)²⁸. Even the life of the microbe received its unsuspecting due in the form of hydrophobia in «Zur Warnung». It is hardly surprising that many are affected or even battered by the weather²⁹.

- 18 «Ein Stündlein wohl vor Tag», «Das verlassene Mägglein», «Begegnung», «Fussreise», «An eine Aeolsharfe», «Im Frühling», «Auf einer Wanderung», «Zitronenfalter im April», «Um Mitternacht», «Auf eine Christblume I und II», «In der Frühe», «Karwoche», «Zum neuen Jahr», «Neue Liebe», «Wo find ich Trost», «Lied eines Verliebten», «Nixe Binsefuss», «Die Geister am Mummelsee», «Storchenbotschaft».
- 19 «Der Genesene an die Hoffnung», «Der Tambour», «Das verlassene Mägglein», «Fussreise», «Verborgenheit», «Im Frühling», «Zitronenfalter im April», «Auf eine Christblume I», «Karwoche», «Zum neuen Jahr», «An die Geliebte», «Heimweh», «Der Jäger», «Rat einer Alten», «Nixe Binsefuss», «Gesang Weylas».
- 20 «Ein Stündlein wohl vor Tag», «Jägerlied», «Nimmersatte Liebe», «Fussreise», «Im Frühling», «Auf einer Wanderung», «Elfenlied», «Um Mitternacht», «Auf eine Christblume I und II», «Auf ein altes Bild», «Schlafendes Jesuskind», «Peregrina II», «Frage und Antwort», «Heimweh», «Der Jäger», «Lied eines Verliebten», «Nixe Binsefuss», «Gesang Weylas», «Die Geister am Mummelsee», «Storchenbotschaft», «Zur Warnung».
- 21 «Der Knabe und das Immlein», «Der Gärtner», «Karwoche», «Rat einer Alten».
- 22 «Agnes», «Lied vom Winde», «Denk' es, o Seele!», «Der Feuerreiter».
- 23 «Er ist's», «Begegnung», «An eine Aeolsharfe», «Im Frühling», «Agnes», «Auf einer Wanderung», «Der Gärtner», «Zitronenfalter im April», «Auf eine Christblume I und II», «Auf ein altes Bild», «Schlafendes Jesuskind», «Karwoche», «Zum neuen Jahr», «Heimweh», «Lied vom Winde», «Denk' es, o Seele!», «Rat einer Alten», «Nixe Binsefuss», «Die Geister am Mummelsee», «Zur Warnung».
- 24 «Der Knabe und das Immlein», «Ein Stündlein wohl vor Tag», «Jägerlied», «Fussreise», «Im Frühling», «Auf einer Wanderung», «Elfenlied», «Der Gärtner», «Karwoche», «Rat einer Alten», «Nixe Binsefuss», «Storchenbotschaft», «Zur Warnung».
- 25 «Der Knabe und das Immlein», «Im Frühling», «Elfenlied», «Zitronenfalter im April», «Auf eine Christblume II».
- 26 «Der Tambour», «Nimmersatte Liebe», «Der Gärtner», «Auf eine Christblume I», «Denk' es, o Seele!», «Der Jäger», «Der Feuerreiter», «Storchenbotschaft».
- 27 «Erstes Liebeslied eines Mädchens».
- 28 «Erstes Liebeslied eines Mädchens», «Lied eines Verliebten», «Nixe Binsefuss».
- 29 As in «Jägerlied», «Er ist's», «Begegnung», «An eine Aeolsharfe», «Im Frühling», «Agnes», «Auf einer Wanderung», «Der Gärtner», «Frage und Antwort», «Lied vom Winde», «Der Jäger», «Der Feuerreiter», «Nixe Binsefuss», «Gesang Weylas».

Such relentless exploration of nature and its various manifestations has the flavour of a conscious choice. At least two writers have noticed that Wolf downplayed certain elements in Mörike: the extensively varied motive of «Die Frühe» (though there are still examples), and certain poems with fixed, epic, or realistic circumstances that were foreign to «the twilight, the fleetingly changing chiaroscuro». ³⁰ The sublime in nature as a result tends to be confined to a small number of Wolf's settings (the wind in «Lied vom Winde» is no hurricane) and may be mediated through the supernatural as in «Die Geister am Mummelsee». The sublime in Mörike tends in any case to be subsumed in other categories that revolve around his perception of the invisible life in things. That left an extraordinarily wide range of themes touching on nature for Wolf to explore. Nevertheless, it was in Mörike's nature for certain limiting factors to come into play, most obviously the manner in which Wolf's choice tended to centre on the Biedermeier side of the poet.³¹ Brigitte Peuker has expressed a more interesting facet of nature in Mörike when she pointed to its «indebtedness to Goethe and to the environment of literariness in general», particularly «when the poem is most insistent about its spontaneous lyrical fluidity.» Nature in Mörike laboured under the «problem of belatedness» in which organicism struggled with topoi, «egregiously mistaken «realistic» detail(s)», epigrams, and «the *petrification* of the object, the rendering inorganic of the organic...strategies...central to the *Dinggedicht*.»³² The striking and controversial statement, «for Mörike nature and Goethe are (like nature and Homer for Pope), the same», serves to illustrate the distance between book and nature and suggests a caution in interpreting songs that claim to respond with unusually complete sensitivity to the word.³³ Inscription and petrification are central to «Auf ein altes Bild», «Denk' es, o Seele!», and the two poems «Auf eine Christblume», at least in Peucker's definitions. The comment about the use of topoi also bears on Wolf in its illustrative example, the buzzing of

30 Christian Thorau, «*In der Frühe*: Mörikes Zeit in Hugo Wolf's Musik», in: *Musik-Konzepte 75: Hugo Wolf*, ed. Heinz-Klaus Metzger and Rainer Riehn, Munich: Edition Text+Kritik, 1992, p. 85; Bernhard Böschenstein, «Zum Verhältnis von Dichtung und Musik in Hugo Wolfs Mörikeliedern», in: *Wirkendes Wort* 19, 1969, p. 176; im vorliegenden Band wieder abgedruckt.

31 Böschenstein, «Zum Verhältnis von Dichtung und Musik in Hugo Wolfs Mörikeliedern», p. 177.

32 Brigitte Peuker, «Mörike, Nature Poetry, and the Problem of Belatedness», in: Jeffrey Adams (ed.), *Mörike's Muses: Critical Essays on Eduard Mörike*, Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1990, pp. 47–49.

33 For another writer there is a clear distance between Goethe's interest in the transformations and stages of nature and Mörike's «rapt submersion»: Benno von Wiese, *Eduard Mörike*, Tübingen and Stuttgart: Rainer Wunderlich and Hermann Leins, 1950, p. 47.

bees. Should the student of Wolf speak of word-painting or *topos* in «Der Knabe und das Immlein»?

That the *topos* is prominent in Mörike's depiction of nature is undeniable, as when he uses the garden as love-scene, the rose or the lily as symbolic of varieties of season or love, and the moon as symbol of creation.³⁴ Nature itself can be a *topos* for «the antique interpretation of [its] confinement and irredeemable quality».³⁵ In support there is Mörike's increasing preoccupation with antique metres and poetic forms as possible means of contemplating and measuring nature.³⁶ Whether Wolf responded to this element or interpreted Mörike naïvely is a minor controversy that should raise questions about the composer's much discussed aesthetic of songwriting. When Bernhard Böschenstein investigates the setting of «Um Mitternacht», he claims a distortion of the «antique, mythologizing» character of Mörike's personification of night. The recreated classical becomes subjective, «which changes the legacy of Goethe into a pre-echo of Jugendstil».³⁷ Yet this is precisely the direction in which Brigitte Peucker would take Mörike, away from Goethe towards Rilke and Trakl (and indeed towards the lyrical insistence in Proust on the hidden properties of «mere» things).³⁸

The character of Wolf's «Um Mitternacht» (ex. 1) is something of a test case for his approach to nature in Mörike. The treatment is slightly old-fashioned even in the structure, since the strophic pattern is remarkably simple by Wolf's standards. The melody is also decidedly heavy and regular for so complex a metrical original. Underneath the undulating mass of neighbouring notes that permeate virtually every bar there is a relatively simple harmonic structure. It is a type of harmonic framework that is encountered repeatedly in Wolf in songs of short and intermediate length. The tonic key is treated rather simply and gains resonance through some remarkably Schubertian neighbouring-chord effects that seem from time to time to deliberately encroach on the celebrated opening of Schubert's «Am Meer». The middle section steps up to a key a major third away from the tonic (enharmonically) and here the mass of neighbouring notes do succeed

34 Heinz Gockel, «Venus-Libitina: Mythologische Anmerkungen zu Mörikes *Peregrina*-Zyklus», in: *Wirkendes Wort* 24, 1974, pp. 47–55.

35 Ringhardt, «Der Ton der schönen Natur», p. 69.

36 Friedrich Strack, «Das religiöse Geheimnis der Natur: Zu Mörikes Gedicht *Im Weinberg*», in: *Gedichte und Interpretationen*, Vol. 4, *Vom Biedermeier zum Bürgerlichen Realismus*, ed. Günter Häntzschel, 4 vols., Stuttgart: Reclam, 1983, pp. 94–5; Wiese, *Eduard Mörike*, p. 47.

37 Böschenstein, «Zum Verhältnis von Dichtung und Musik in Hugo Wolfs Mörikeliedern», pp. 179–80.

38 Peucker, «Mörike, Nature Poetry, and the Problem of Belatedness», p. 59.

Example 1: «Um Mitternacht», bars 12–20.

Music score for 'Um Mitternacht' (bars 12–20). The score consists of three systems of music for voice and piano.

Section 1 (B-flat major): The voice part begins with a melodic line: "und ke - cker rau - schen die Quel - len her - vor, _____ sie sin - gen der Mut - ter, der". The piano part features a harmonic bass line with sustained notes and chords.

Section 2 (F major): The voice part continues: "Nacht, ins Ohr _____ vom Ta - ge, _____ vom". The piano part maintains a harmonic bass line with sustained notes and chords.

Section 3 (G major): The voice part concludes with: "heu - te ge - we - se - nen Ta - - ge." The piano part features a harmonic bass line with sustained notes and chords.

in generating a more complex and ambiguous picture that moves beyond Schubert. This is particularly true of bar 11, where a movement of the inner parts seems fused into a single sonority, and of bar 15, where diatonic dissonances are generated by the pedal of the piano in conjunction with the appoggiaturas. Wolf achieves a typically rich but in essence simple cadence in the tonic rather abruptly with one of his characteristic chromatic shifts in the bass (for once not the augmented sixth). The sensation of an almost classical poise stretched but not ultimately disrupted by chromatic profusion is typical of his style and points to one of the reasons why his mastery was essentially that of a great miniaturist. By eschewing more extendable short-term structural devices such as the Wagnerian sequence and remaining with a Schubertian substratum, he denied his songs an easy means of growth. At the same time he underpinned any tendency to a «subjective» treatment with a strong sense of the traditional. His adherence

to a Schubertian scheme is his form of belatedness which generates tension by interacting with the seething tendrils of the appoggiaturas. If there is a possibility of speaking of *Jugendstil*, it remains at the level of pure texture, not harmonic support.

As Eric Sams has noted, the song responds in various ways to the images of day and night. In Wolf's own musical language, the neighbouring-note figuration might well be a symbol of night and dreaming, but it equally well corresponds to the notion of «rauschen», which enters in the fifth line of the poem but is a central *topos* of the Romantic picture of night (bar 12, ex. 1). Figurations of this kind are common in Wolf, as Sams has pointed out, but he refers to them with some justification as motives rather than topics, largely because many but not all of them are characteristic of Wolf rather than of the nineteenth-century Lied as a whole.³⁹ Sams does note the presence of a «common ancestry of a musical idiom already saturated with language», an ancestry that embraces Löwe, Schubert, and Wagner, but discussion of the individual motifs only intermittently suggests where Wolf makes contact with this ancestry, where he remains committed to his own semantic units.⁴⁰ Within Wolf's output the chromatic progression analyzed above is a recognizable variant of one progression that occurs with the force of what V. Kofi Agawu describes as *introversive semiosis*.⁴¹ Conceivably it is a topic in that it has been used with similar constructive purpose since Schubert's time and before. It operates in a different manner from the kind of topic envisaged by critics of Mörike, however, and leads to the inevitable thought that part of the tension in the songs arises from the interplay of two different repertoires and systems of topics.

Wolf comes closest to the kind of topic that Peucker envisages for Mörike when he resorts to some easily identifiable form of natural imitation. Bird-song is one possible example. The presence of a bird in Mörike's text is no guarantee of a pictorial response in Wolf, as «Ein Stündlein wohl vor Tag» demonstrates: the swallow's song is reflected in register but little else. Indeed register, as symbol of flight into higher areas, is part of Wolf's repertory of bird effects as in «Jägerlied». At other extremes there is the case of «Storchenbotschaft» where the storks' commotion is clearly word-painting unique to this song.

39 See Eric Sams, *The Songs of Hugo Wolf*, Paperback edn., London: Faber, 1992, pp. 27 and 95.

40 Ibid., p. 17; less than fifty per cent of the motifs are traced to other composers (among whom Schumann is the most prominent), and often only a single forerunner, rather than a dense intertextual web, is suggested.

41 V. Kofi Agawu, *Playing with Signs: A Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991, pp. 51–79.

In songs that invoke the nightingale, Wolf's response is more interesting, since this is a case where a topic may reasonably be claimed to exist, the extended trill used by Beethoven in the «Pastoral» Symphony and echoed explicitly or implicitly on numerous occasions by other composers. Here Wolf is by no means willing to resort to the facile device as a matter of course. «Zur Warnung» treats the nightingale as secondary to its comic grotesquerie, «Auf einer Wanderung» uses registral change again for the choir of nightingales, and «Elfenlied» uses a measured trill motivically immediately after the elf thinks of nightingale or «Silpelit», rather as the cuckoo's fourth (as in Mahler) is used near the end. Yet the trill *topos* occurs at one point where the nightingale might possibly stand for whole chorus of birds, in the central section of «Karwoche».⁴² Rather as in the final song of *Das Lied von der Erde*, the idea of birds falling silent can only be evoked by a sudden outburst of trills and runs that extends over eleven bars of the score before vanishing. When Wolf orchestrated «Karwoche», he underlined the effect by scattering the trills and runs between flute and piccolo (again as in a later Mahlerian work, the Second Symphony) with overlaps that create the sensation not just of the bird's voice but of an unearthly one. That a specific bird is being thought of is further suggested in another flute, which produces a quite distinct song that is not in the keyboard original. A further haze of upper string tremolo places this chorus in something resembling Siegfried's forest. For once Wolf's orchestral version acquires a fresh momentum since the bell sounds in the lower strings echo the bird song uncannily in a far distant register. Wolf thus is fully capable of responding to a literary *topos* (bird-song as harbinger of joy) with a musical *topos* that adds its own layer of specificity to the song.

Helga de la Motte-Haber has contrasted the approaches of different ages to such examples of tone-painting and noted that «frequently the means remained similar over centuries». Wolf's use of birdsong in «Karwoche» is more deeply complicit with the past in that it is hard to say precisely that it is present as «expression of inner feelings» in a post-Beethovenian sense. In de la Motte-Haber's scheme, Wolf's birds could be seen as typical of the baroque attitude in their simple mimesis and in their insistence on abiding by well-ordered musical syntax.⁴³ If «Mörike stands categorically by the principle of mimesis», as has been suggested, then Wolf is fully capable of responding faithfully with imitation of nature in a related musical spirit.⁴⁴

42 For a contrasting opinion that the birds in «Karwoche» are larks, see Siegfried Schmalzriedt, «Hugo Wolfs Vertonung von Mörikes Gedicht *Karwoche*: Realistische Züge im spätromantischen Lied», in: *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 41, 1984, p. 51.

43 Helga de la Motte-Haber, *Musik und Natur*, Laaber: Laaber-Verlag, 2000, p. 133.

44 Strack, «Das religiöse Geheimnis der Natur», p. 106.

Simple mimesis hardly reflects the full complexity of Wolf's response to natural imagery in his chosen poets, however, and consideration inevitably has to move beyond such relatively simple topics as bird-song.

Julian Johnson, a writer sympathetic to Sams' ideas, has noted that in Anton Webern (his main object of study) and Wolf, «the musical device is the means by which the separate literary ideas are elided, so that the notion of self-surrender to a larger whole is more important than the specific referents of the text.»⁴⁵ This is not dissimilar to Leonard Ratner's discussion of the thoroughly well-attested notion of a single ruling topic that holds together the flow of specific topical activity.⁴⁶ Song, however, presents the complex situation that «specific referents» may be both literary and musical. Thus the literary «bird» of «Karwoche» becomes the musical «nightingale» of Wolf's setting; the reverse may be equally true, as in the example (considered by Johnson) of the nightingale in Johannes Brahms' «In Waldesinsamkeit», which does not identify the bird by the trill motive, relying on a more general piano figuration and vocal register for its effect. Instrumental music's use of topics, for that matter, is not materially different from that of the song, except that in the latter «specific referents» can be both literary and musical. The single ruling topic is also of necessity complex, in that it can be a structural sign of the kind that Agawu analyzes or it can be a large-scale elaboration of an extroversive sign, a topic that relates to content.⁴⁷

If Sams is right about the neighbouring-note figuration of «Um Mitternacht», it represents a good example of a single extroversive sign elaborated over the whole course of a song while underlying it a tonal-harmonic formula links it to many other songs by Schubert or Wolf. If the referents that these catch up are mostly literary, there remains in each verse a striking extra voice in the piano part that announces its presence by regularly repeated dotted minims. A Schenkerian would note with pleasure that this eventually broadens into dotted semibreves and completes the Ursatz (bars 18–20). What it might represent is altogether more mysterious, though Sams speaks accurately enough of its entry at the mention of singing streams and notes its specific echoing of «Tage». Its function is part cohesion, part colour. The «bold» or «cheeky» rushing of the streams seems to conjure up the exaggerated ninth of its first bar, the later fifths and fourths assert a contrasting sobriety for the mother and the night, and a semitonal fall

45 Julian Johnson, *Webern and the Transformation of Nature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 54.

46 Leonard G. Ratner, *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style*, New York: Schirmer, 1980, pp. 218–9.

47 Agawu, *Playing with Signs*, Chapter 3, *passim*.

from →⁶ to →⁵ offers a shadowy undertow to the major third of «Tage». It resembles a *cantus firmus* in its long-note regularity, yet it feels like a horn part. As a whole, it reveals the perilous nature of musical hermeneutics in its refusal to yield a single definable mood, motive, or topic. The «musical device», as Johnson so tentatively describes it, is thus possessed of a very insubstantial relationship to connotation as well as denotation. Between the ruling topics, motives, or structural signs and the «specific referents», there is another level of material that serves as cohesive device with allusive capacity. In this area the poet's topics are only fleetingly reflected. It is hardly possible, however, to adduce this as support for the notion that Wolf has rendered it more subjective, less classical, and shaped it towards the world of *Jugendstil*; for such cohesive middle voices are the very essence of musical classicism and romanticism. What Wolf has done is to respond to a specific literary idea in the use of the central figuration and then allowed musical processes to take over in fruitful but uneasy counterpoint with the literary topics.

«Er ist's» is another clear case of a song that has a ruling figuration with a further array of referents or allusions. That the main figuration is expressive of spring is hardly to be doubted, and Benno von Wiese's proposition about the music that Mörike describes – «But this music is the spring» – draws attention to the close interrelation between the poetic text and the idea of music in itself.⁴⁸ Sams draws attention to the discrepancy between Mörike's «shy and tender evocation» of spring and the «brilliance and energy» with which Wolf transformed it.⁴⁹ The orchestral version adds to this impression by the recklessness with which it pits its substantial forces against the voice. Here, apparently, is a more radical reinterpretation of the natural world and its affects that might point to an approach in Wolf distinct from his poets.

The details perhaps amount to even more. Spring in the text is characterized by his «blue ribbon», in which the ideas of the sky and fluttering are elided to one concrete metaphor. As if he had been studying Eduard Hanslick, Wolf responds with kinetic motion suggestive of the dynamics of the ribbon. To this the orchestral version adds a further layer of trills and arpeggios in flutes. The interplay of the two distinct arpeggios in the piano part can be related to that fluttering or to the more general thrill that «rustlings of spring» are supposed to invoke. The trill in general is an effect that Wolf extends throughout the first half of the song, whether the subject is the fluttering ribbon, the «sweet breezes», or the sound of harps, and it could equally well extend these connotations to the familiar province of birdsong.

48 Wiese, *Eduard Mörike*, p. 49.

49 Sams, *Songs of Hugo Wolf*, p. 72.

The voice part is unusually blunt and folk-like for Wolf. It describes the blue ribbon with more arpeggios, but the effect is stolid, suggesting its role in *Maler Nolten* as a working song that Sams brings into his discussion as symptomatic of what Wolf's setting has lost from the poem.⁵⁰ The scents of spring, the dreams of violets, and the sound of a harp that may be magical or even Aeolian are more delicately treated than the breezes with a chromatic vocal line, correspondingly elliptical rhythms, and surprising harmonic shifts including resources such as the augmented sixth. The assertion of spring's responsibility brings back the more fanfare-like vocal line and resolves in typical fashion the German sixth, at which point a long postlude interprets what we have just heard.

The reinterpretation proceeds not from the interplay of arpeggios, which dwindle to one in the left hand; it has to reproduce the sense of full sonority with half the resources previously devoted to the fluttering. The right hand presents in succession a reworking of the initial vocal line about the blue band, an upward extension of the arpeggios to the blue sky, and then spreads out over the keyboard in semiquaver duplets that stand out against the triplets of the left hand. These triplets use the same kind of figuration as «Um Mitternacht» but the effect is quite different. Here they suggest Johnson's «Sustained tonic chord as the totality of nature».⁵¹ The duplets on the other hand are not without a natural connotation either. In Schubert's «Auf dem Wasser zu singen», they support a narrative of «mirroring waves», «whispering reeds», «shimmering wings», and escape from «the flux of time». Their descent and ascent is a well-known symbol of vanishing into the distance (as with the river at the end of Bedřich Smetana's *Vltava*). The implication is clear. Mörike anticipates spring's arrival in the topoi of sympathetic nature (breezes, scents, violets, and magic harps): they stand for a personal insight that comes to the servant girl of *Maler Nolten* or simply to the poet depending on context. Wolf celebrates its moment of arrival in the most blatant of manners, depicts its universality, and then follows its eventual dissolution from the immediate fabric of time. In this there is considerably more substance to the idea that Wolf's picture of nature latently is more sublime and all-encompassing than Biedermeier conventions would have allowed.

If there is a specifically Wolfian attitude to nature that transcends the immediate task of setting poetry, it may seem most likely to emerge in those settings that directly address the meaning of nature in religious terms. That there was an immense gulf between the outlook of Mörike the

50 Ibid.

51 Johnson, *Webern*, p. 64.

theologian and scholar and the free-thinking Wolf goes without saying. There may well be a case for saying that when Wolf tackled poems on religious themes, he approached them with precisely the same spirit that he displayed when the subject was Suleika or the supernatural. «Gebet» offers a certain support for this in its use of the *topos* for religion in nineteenth-century art-music, the four-square homophony of the hymn-tune. The artifice of the procedure infects the invocation of the Golden Mean, for the melody, *zart und ausdrucks voll*, that emerges then has all the charm and originality of a choral descant until it drifts off into some Wagnerian heaven that has as little to do with the moderation extolled as with the prayer being enacted. The piety of the poetry verges on the sanctimonious and Wolf reproduces it all too accurately.

In Wolf's songs that deal with religion, there is a set of signifiers that stand for a certain type of pastoral innocence. These remain constant irrespective of the poet. The finest examples are the setting of Mörike's «Zum neuen Jahr», and two Spanish settings, «Führ' mich, Kind, nach Bethlehem» and «Ach, des Knaben Augen». Each of the latter two is a nativity poem, and the Mörike poem is a seasonal church song. It speaks of cherubs, rosy feet, and the jubilation of the faithful, before bringing in God in his capacity of ruler of the heavens and the celestial bodies. This imagery is far from «Führ mich, Kind», where the image of the child may remember the cherub, and God is certainly present, but there is a new emphasis on human frailty. Nor does «Ach, des Knaben Augen» in any strict sense reproduce similar literary images to «Zum neuen Jahr». It contemplates the infant's eyes and smile, their radiance, and their reflection in the poet. Yet all three songs have a common source of material, the use of major-mode diatonic thirds in both hands, frequently producing gentle dissonances from the prevailing contrary motion. A writer on musical topics in Wolf like Sams, although he sees the connection between the three songs, does not make particularly coherent characterizations of what this recurring texture might mean.⁵² It is contrasted in «Führ mich, Kind» with a minor-mode variant that is also present in another Spanish song, «Nun wandre, Maria». There seems to be more in common between these, since the latter speaks of Maria's pain that

52 Sams, *Songs of Hugo Wolf*, pp. 26 and 106, speaks of thirds and «companionship», thus connecting «Zum neuen Jahr» and «Nun wandre, Maria»; on p. 256 he notes the link between the latter and «Führ' mich, Kind», and on p. 257 he notes the resemblance between «Ach, des Knaben Augen» but comments that the consecutive «thirds and sixths are perhaps more decorative than motivic.» The latter seems to me to be an irrelevant distinction at this point in his argument, however penetrating an insight into the structural aspect of both songs.

is similar to the sufferings of humanity in «Führ mich, Kind». There remains the only real interpretative conclusion regarding the three predominantly diatonic settings, that this texture in Wolf's mind is inextricably bound up with religious innocence and is extended to the natural world.

The settings are not uniform by any means, since the Mörike song lies for much of its time in a higher register, even when the cherub sets its «rosy feet» on the earth. The textures and the harmonies have enough in common, however, for the listener to sense some sort of semantic equivalence also at the point where Wolf lowers the harmony by a major third at key moments in «Zum neuen Jahr» and «Ach, des Knaben Augen»: in the one, the ecstatic B major of the rejoicing faithful is replaced by a contemplative G major for God and the heavens; in the other, C gives way to A flat as contemplation of the infant's gaze yields to its reflection in the poet. The near-cliché of the harmonic leap of a major third conveys a sudden shift in tone that is infinitely adaptable to context. It is another near-structural sign that alerts the listener to the deepening of response. In the Mörike setting, it points to the kernel of the poem in Wolf's interpretation. The thirds are the diatonic blank page on which the majesty of God in nature is suddenly revealed.

The texture is not a regular feature of Wolf's style, but it is worth noting the related manner of one of the Italian settings, «Und steht Ihr früh am Morgen», which reunites cherubs with nature and God (in that sequence) and similarly deepens its diatonic thirds and sixths with third leaps at mention of the Mass (from C to E), again at the sanctuary (from E to A flat), at the beloved's glance (from A flat to C), and finally settles in E rather than the C major of the opening. It would seem that in Wolf, innocence, beauty, and natural imagery summon forth a certain kind of extended diatonicism, rich in neighbouring-note effects and the most fleeting of dissonances, that generates musical development by leaps of major thirds in either direction. Yet its difference from his habitual highly chromaticized diatonicism is marked enough for it to seem like a sophisticated mask, an assumption of certain traits relating to nature and religion rather than an exposition of a sustained state of mind.

Böschenstein has spoken of «Auf eine Christblume I» as a summation of many aspects of Wolf's treatment of Mörike, and it is also the setting that seems most closely to search for a religious context in which to place themes relating to the natural world.⁵³ The poem, «the most fulfilled poem in which Mörike's mythic consciousness of nature attains lyrical speech», contains a particular complex fusion of topics that reflect both its inter-

⁵³ Böschenstein, «Zum Verhältnis von Dichtung und Musik in Hugo Wolf's Mörikeliedern», pp. 192–3.

esting genesis and its importance to his image of nature.⁵⁴ It is well-known that Mörike first recounted his discovery of the Christmas rose in terms of botanical exactitude to Wilhelm Hartlaub before drawing attention to its power to stir his emotions.⁵⁵ The result of this was the conception of the flower as incarnation of a mystical spirit that grew magical in its perception by the elf whom Wolf raises to the presiding musical spirit of the final section. That the flower was found in a churchyard accords with its kinship to the lily (symbol of Hera according to Heinz Gockel).⁵⁶ It stands by graves like a sentinel, endowing them with an aura that chimes with Wolf's reactions to the grave of Kleist. The aura is all they share, however, since Kleist's grave essentially moves Wolf to melancholy contemplation that agrees with the desolate silence that broods over the glistening Havelland. The Christmas rose inspires Mörike to a contemplation of a moon-like cold that sits slightly at an angle to the picture of the moon as «father of Apis» that Gockel finds elsewhere in the poet.⁵⁷

If the moon in Mörike is generally symbol of the «rule of chthonic and venereal powers in the realm of art», the first «Christblume» poem is at pains to separate the cold earth from love through emphasis on the grave and on the virginal.⁵⁸ Indeed the poem plays against the dominant image of the moon by emphasizing that what is joy for other flowers is death for it. The wintry scene becomes a magical kingdom, moving the elf to awe at the mystic flower. Into this already complex picture that plays both with and against a number of topics, Mörike inserted a further layer that links the rose to the flower of Christ's passion through the five drops of crimson that it resists wearing; its unlikely green is part of the mystery. The link is suggested but deliberately revoked; the flower is its own spirit and does not partake of the central Christian mystery.

One writer has noted that the description of the flower is essentially a «fairytale landscape».⁵⁹ The natural details are thus not intended to mesh on any realistic level. From the bleak winter environs in which the flower is found, Mörike passes into a landscape of snow, deer, pool, and the elf. The emphasis is once again on a pastoral or natural innocence that gains depth from the strangely potent mixture of cold and balsamic breezes, whose recollection by Wolf in the mountains now seems truly bathetic in comparison with what he made of them in music. Should it be deduced

54 Wiese, *Eduard Mörike*, p. 72.

55 Gerhard Storz, *Eduard Mörike*, Stuttgart: Ernst Klett, 1967, p. 349.

56 Gockel, «Venus-Libitina», p. 48.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid., p. 55.

59 Storz, *Eduard Mörike*, p. 351.

from this that Wolf revelled in the self-sufficient beauty of the images and recoiled from the complexities of Mörike's chain of thought? Sams comes close to suggesting this, imagining the song as «succession of exquisite moments» rather than «an organic whole». ⁶⁰ It is doubtful, however, if organic whole is what Mörike himself had in mind, with his deliberate attempt to steer the chain of thought in a direction that is then revoked. Gerhard Storz notes that «between the supernatural (the ‹blessed mother›, the ‹holy passion›) and the natural, which is symbolized by the elf, there stands the lunar flower alone and in itself, unobtainable in its ‹mystic glory›», and it is evident that this poem is shot through with paradoxical formulae such as the embodiment of the natural in the supernatural (the elf) and the idea of a moon-nourished flower. ⁶¹ The organic seems to have been inverted into a different mystical order. The mystical does not stress the wholeness of things but seemingly impermeable layers. Perhaps this is why Mörike created the companion poem that appears as an alienation from the original. This possibility is reflected in the relative degrees of unity that Wolf invested in his two songs.

This is not the place to pursue a detailed investigation of what might or might not be organic in the first «Christblume» song. Since the unity of the second is made manifest on the level of the repeated motive that is adaptable to most conceivable tonal and harmonic contexts, it is enough to note that no such binding motive or topic appears in the first. If it has a form, it derives from balanced yet varied sections. The music of the nocturnal grove (one of Sams' motives, connoting «Night and wakefulness») is transformed into the whispering but distorted triplets of the elf. ⁶² Whether the original octaves are the footsteps of the deer is a matter of conjecture, but the susurration of the elf's music makes it a cousin of the insect music of «Der Knabe und das Immlein» as well as of the birds in «Karwoche». This pre-Bartókian night music captures the essence of the natural in the supernatural figure of the elf.

Against these related sections of nature music (for if the octaves do not suggest the deer, they at least contribute to the nocturnal sense of mystery), the rose inhabits a graveyard that draws on the hymnal music of the church once more, but which is transmuted into Wagnerian intensity as «öd' und winterlich» gives way to the apostrophe of the rose's beauty. As in many songs by Wolf, a recurring device is the diatonic cadence that wrests a

60 Sams, *Songs of Hugo Wolf*, p. 96.

61 Storz, *Eduard Mörike*, p. 352.

62 Sams, *Songs of Hugo Wolf*, p. 26.

moment of almost unnatural clarity from intense chromatic surroundings. This seldom occurs more than once or twice in a song, but here it is surprisingly common during one section, in bars 26, 44, and 60 (ex. 2). In turn it illuminates the maiden and her happy fate (to be guarded by the rose), the magic kingdom, and the balsamic air. This latter is particularly and appropriately complex, since the characteristic clarification is expected in F sharp major at «himmlischer Kälte», unexpectedly switches to B flat for what promises to be the true cadence at «balsamsüsse», and then is unexpectedly revoked by chromatic complications at «Luft».

Example 2: «Auf eine Christblume», bars 25/26, 33/34, 46–51.

bar 25

Voice: ist's ei - ne Jung - frau, lib - lich fiel ihr Teil.

Piano: *pp*

bar 33

Voice: dort sucht' ich dei - ner Hei -

Piano: *pp*

bar 46

Voice: - mat Zau - ber - reich. Leib voll Reif und Duft,

Pno: *pp*

Voice: himm - li - scher Käl - te bal - sam - sü - be Luft.

Pno: *pp*

The interplay of expectations is particularly complex here. A deceptive cadence habitually operates by replacing the expected tonic with a different diatonic or chromatic chord neighbouring to the dominant. Wolf achieves a similar effect of the unanticipated by using a reverse device, a perfect cadence so transparent (except for the inevitable suspension) as to be a surprise in so chromatic a style. The arrival in B flat at «Harm und Schaden» in the

Spanish Songbook's «Nun bin ich dein» is the locus classicus (ex. 3). In the first «Christblume», Wolf goes a step further and frustrates the transparent B flat by a real deceptive shift to a chromatic resource. As a result, the hymnal textures of the opening on their reappearance no longer belong to the world of the church yard but to the paradoxical world of the rose. As with the transformation of night music into elf, a hidden world is developed out of the everyday. Natural phenomena become the symbols of magic and the mystic.

Example 3: «Nun bin ich dein», bars 31–34.

Music score for 'Nun bin ich dein', bars 31–34. The score consists of two staves: Voice (soprano) and Piano. The vocal line begins with 'An dich sich schmie - gen, zu dei - nen Fü - ssen lie - gen' (piano dynamic pp). The piano accompaniment consists of harmonic chords. The vocal line continues with 'heilt al - len Harm und Scha - den.' (piano dynamic p). The piano accompaniment features sustained notes and harmonic chords.

Wolf thus achieves something rather close to Mörike's interplay of natural and supernatural by drawing upon topics, tone-painting, and his own rather more intrinsically musical procedures. For it must be stressed that features such as the surprising moments of diatonic illumination are hardly tied to any one feature, but act as representatives of a process that fits many contexts. In such cases, it hardly seems to matter whether he is observing his much-vaunted fidelity to Mörike or not. There are times when his settings illuminate Mörike's words with surprising clarity, but this is not quite the same as clarifying the words. There are times when he seems to reinterpret, but these are often the by-products of features that seem to belong to musical processes rather than a view of nature. In this context it is worth remembering a comparison that one Mörike scholar has made between the poet and such French contemporaries as Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Rimbaud:

For as much as Mörike evaded his instinct in consequence of the autonomy of the material, as much as the connection to the reality of experience loosened and transformed itself in his poetry, in equal measure he was never seduced into deliberately sublating that connection, destroying it completely, and wishing to put a newly constructed reality in its place. From this point of view the double poem «Auf eine Christblume» is important: we could trace the path from precise botanical report about the flower that he had never seen before (in the letter to Hartlaub) up to the completely disembodied symbolism of the second poem. This route is put aside by the loving absorption of the poet in the essence of the flower that moves him: it is the devotion to the object that finally exhausts his reality. Therefore he manages with the old accustomed language, he has no need of a tissue of precious obscure metaphors, but he still decides on a verse that has the power to renew and transform language.⁶³

If we bear in mind that Wolf had a somewhat different attitude to the «old accustomed language» that Schubert and others had passed on, and that it embraced the experience of Wagner, it is hardly surprising if his picture of nature seems more romantic than the mythologizing Mörike. What is worthy of note is how far he preserved elements of Mörike's response regardless of the vagaries and complexities of topical interplay in two different media.

Passé le premier recueil publié en 1837, hommage à Mörike pour l'anniversaire de sa mort, *Six poèmes de Schubert, Mörike, Goethe et Kerner* – le créateur prend l'habitude de consacrer un poème à son auteur favori, intégralement par différence envers ce dernier. A son agent il laisse du recueil une explication: *Gedicht von Eduard Mörike für eine Singstimme und Klavier, entnommen aus dem Werk von Hugo Wolf*. Si Hugo Wolf est trop respectueux du son poète pour s'en servir comme d'un agent second de sa confession personnelle à la présentation et la mise en forme de l'univers du poète par les élans de la réverbération des poèmes entre eux n'en dévoilent pas moins le monde animé du compositeur. Ainsi Hugo Wolf publie en 1889 *les chansons* trois Mörike-Lieder composés à Potsdam dans la fin d'octobre entre le 18 octobre et le 26 novembre 1863. Cette œuvre est significative car elle illustre une démarche réinterprétant les chansons de Mörike en

⁶³ Hugo Wolf est un des plus grands qui ne créent que pour déclarer ce qui ne connaissent que les langues baroques de graine où la vérité passe inaperçue elle aussi, se cacher et se déguiser, échapper à l'œil, la faire reconnaître seulement. Voir Wolf, p. 262.
Hugo Wolf, *Die Lieder von Hugo Wolf*, Wolf 1887, p. 125-127. Hugo Wolf, *Hugo Wolf: A Biography*, Princeton 2007, p. 202.
Riedel, p. 226.
Hugo Wolf, *Gedichte von Eduard Mörike (Gedichtzyklen)*, Ausgabe Wörth, Wien 1989 (1912, 1, 1962).

