

“Zusammenstimmung” – Poetics of Private Space in 19th Century’s Literature

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In 1854 the historian Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl passionately reminded his writing contemporaries of the potentials he perceives in post-classical German literature. Adopting the rhetorics of prophetic speech Riehl claims that “der Quell der Poesie [...] in dem deutschen Hause verborgen ist”.^[1] The house and traditional family life would represent the source of poetic creativity that the bourgeois restoration period was longing for. Riehl suggests that this precious source “nur des Poeten harret, der den Mosisstab besitzt, um ihn herauszuschlagen!”^[2] In fact, mid and late nineteenth century’s German literature will unfold an abundance of narrated houses, castles, private rooms and domestic scenery, reaching from the architectural projects of Goethe’s novel *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (1809) to the bourgeois palais in Thomas Mann’s *Buddenbrooks* (1901). However, the subtitle of the latter – “Verfall einer Familie” – indicates a link between the narration of houses and a phenomenon which Riehl meant to overcome precisely by reestablishing the idea of the “ganzes Haus”: His writing on *Die Familie* should have provided a remedy for social disintegration. But literature ultimately proves to contravene Riehl’s purposes. Instead of reaffirming the cultural order of the past, “[das] so große[] Motiv[] des deutschen Hauses”^[3] induces a discussion about the contemporary experience of disintegration. In a singular way the narration of houses is able to display the epistemological changes defining social and aesthetic modernity. Apparently, Riehl was not at all mistaken regarding “the house” as a “Schatz”^[4] for future poetic imagination in literature – albeit out of a contrary motivation.

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By focusing on houses and the domestic sphere, the literary discourse of the nineteenth century confronts the impact of modernization. The house, both as a real and a metaphoric figure, can be considered as one of the most intriguing objects for articulating the effects of economic, social and political changes especially after 1848. Industrialization and urbanization – just to mention two keywords – affected the real conditions of living; people were forced into migration, growing mobility made the dreams of settling and keeping one’s own house all the more illusory. The loss of the

traditional order, typically embodied in the figure of the house, was one price to be paid in the course of modernization. Generally speaking, from around 1800 onwards the disintegration of the classical episteme manifested itself in various places. Following Michel Foucault it has often been stated that the end of the classical episteme could be identified with a process of differentiation in society as well as in the arts and the sciences. [5] Narrated houses, however, occupy a special place within the transition to modernity: Since antiquity, architecture (and especially its basic figure, the house) represents security in a broad sense. In the practice of ancient rhetorics the picture of a house was meant to guarantee *memoria*; a well structured spacial order provided the conditions of orientation as such.[6] Thus it seems consistent that the discussion concerning the disintegration of the substantial epistemological basis in the modern world is situated at the very moment when historians as well as novelists dealt with the material shape of the house: The aporetic status of modernity is most prominently revealed in the representation of houses. General acceleration of life and its inherent questioning of heritage on the one hand, and “anti-modern”, nostalgic imaginations of the past on the other, are intimately connected in the bourgeois period;[7] the vision of a “ganzes Haus”, representing totality, unity and consistency, coincides thoroughly with the modern experience of fragmentation.

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It cannot be denied that the nineteenth century’s discourse pays great attention to what can only be considered as a part of the house: its interior space. In what way does the frequent representation of the interior linked to the house’s above introduce potentials of epistemological reflection? – Walter Benjamin, who intended to write a “Urgeschichte der Moderne”[8], attributed great relevance to the interior as a figure in which the aporetic modern constellation constituted itself. In the *Passagen-Werk* Benjamin attempts to characterize the interior, demonstrating its social as well as its aesthetic shape. Under the rule of Louis-Philippe, i.e. in the 1830’s and 40’s, Benjamin states, some fundamental changes take place:

“Für den Privatmann tritt erstmals der Lebensraum in Gegensatz zu der Arbeitsstätte. Der erste konstituiert sich im Interieur. Das Kontor ist sein Komplement. Der Privatmann, der im Kontor der Realität Rechnung trägt, verlangt vom Interieur in seinen Illusionen unterhalten zu werden. [...] Dem entspringen die Phantasmagorien des Interieurs. Es stellt für den Privatmann das Universum dar. In ihm versammelt er die Ferne und die Vergangenheit.”[9]

As Benjamin stresses, an opposition between the private space and the place of work becomes apparent in the first decades of the nineteenth century. It has often been observed that industrialization and the division of labour split up the pre-modern unity of dwelling and working, which is in fact significant for the notion of the interior. The interior is formed, as it were, from the separation of a so-called private space from the outside world; the interior is defined by a separation. Its perfect isolation is a basic quality of the interior. Thus, the interior can be considered as a result of general disintegration that is most frequently described by contemporaries in terms of mechanization, fragmentation and even death. The conservative historian Riehl observes, for example, that in contemporary residential building the rooms were multiplied in order to provide a

separate space for every single member of a family.[10] According to Riehl, this parcelling of the private space in favour of the individual would destroy the organic and living structure of the “ganzes Haus”. He deplores the loss of a unity, describing its consequences: isolated spatial units. Interior space in the nineteenth century, as experienced and conceptualized within contemporary discourse, is marked by spacial dissociation and functional differentiation.

Correspondingly, in the interior furnishing there can be found traces of the general social fragmentation that the interior typically represents. Due to rising mass production and new consumer habits, the private space tends to fill with a multitude of different items, as the sociologist Georg Simmel for example observed.[11] Walter Benjamin states a “zunehmende Ausgestaltung des Interieurs”[12] that in fact refers to the characteristic proliferation of objects in the interior. Since the provenance and the connotations of these objects prove to be utterly different, the interior risks to represent a completely incoherent accumulation of objects; as several contemporaries remark, it risks to turn into a veritable curiosity shop. The interior therefore faces the problem of disintegration that modernization had caused. Whereas the private space was supposed to bring relief from this experience, the bourgeois was in a way haunted right in the middle of his privacy – by the principle of functional differentiation that his economic status was based upon. I emphasize this point because as far as I see, the dissociated world of objects induces precisely those strategies of harmonization typical for the aesthetic shape of the interior. The following will specifically focus on the aesthetic representation of private space.

I suggest to go back to the Benjamin quote once more to make this a little more obvious. Contrast between inside and outside is not the only thing characterizing the interior; it rather seems as if at the same time any sort of difference is to be abolished. As Benjamin claims, the private space is the place of “Illusionen” and “Phantasmagorien”, it represents a “Universum” in which even “die Ferne und die Vergangenheit” are integrated. The interior becomes a “Stimulans des Rausches und des Traumes”[13]. Despite how heterogeneous the real objects surrounding the individual might be, they have to be joined together: A somewhat fluid, immaterial, dreamlike link is supposed to unify the differences which make themselves felt in the modern interior. The interior is to be transformed into a continuous space without any moments of disruption. In other words, private space demands harmonization. Furnishing becomes a business of calculated emotional stimulation that is provoked by highly artificial means. A whole set of metaphors enters the discourse in order to describe the absolute harmony ideally reigning over the fragmented interior space. Remarkably enough, the book market of the period supplies the individual with a special *genre* that represents this general imperative to create a comfortable, i.e. a sophisticatedly designed home: it shows a wide range of writings on the decoration of the private space, characteristically both offering practical advice and locating the issue of how to furnish one’s home within a cultural-historic horizon.

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The art historian Jacob von Falke published in 1871 a book called *Die Kunst im Hause*. Within a few years several editions of this practical guide to furnishing were released. In the introduction to *Die Kunst im Hause* he explains his intentions as follows:

“Wir sollten “umsomehr diesen Mikrokosmos unserer Wohnung zu schmücken trachten, als er ja gewöhnlich die einzige kleine Welt ist, in der wir Herr und Gebieter sind [...] Sollten wir es nicht der Mühe werth erachten, ihn gerade so zu schmücken und so einzurichten und auszustatten, daß er ganz und gar mit unseren eigenen Gefühlen und Bedürfnissen harmonirt [...]?”[14]

Evidently, Falke’s suggestion to concentrate on the appropriate furnishing of the domestic interior derives from a specific experience in modern society. Devoting oneself to the “small world” of private space, to which all creative aspirations are confined, culminates in the idea of perfect emotional harmony between the individual and its personal environment. Implicitly, this idea shows that elsewhere – outside the interior – correspondence in general can no longer be achieved. Visible correlation between the separate phenomena, lacking in modernized, fragmented society, is precisely what Falke tries to regain. Thus, Falke’s theory of furnishing is preoccupied with the elimination of all sorts of disparity. He uses the vocabulary of harmonization – as the dogma Falke repeats over and over again proves:

“So ist die Harmonie allerdings das Ziel, und das unerläßliche der modernen Wohnung [...]. Die künstlerische Harmonie beruht auf zwei Momenten, auf der Farbe und der Form; sie setzt bei beiden Einheit, Einklang und die Zusammenstimmung des Verschiedenen voraus.”[15]

The recurrent call for harmony, atmosphere and “Stimmung” – the highly charged german term[16] – in private space can be related to this intention to eliminate as much as possible the differences which are apparent in the world of objects. A continuum of shapes, colours etc. is supposed to guarantee the consistency of private space. Arguing that its harmonious character was indispensable, Falke emphasizes the need to create transitional elements. The creation of “Ueberg[ä]ng[e]” und “ruhige[r] Verbindung” is essential to the art of decoration Falke’s writing represents. He states for instance: “Die Farben müssen nicht auf den Contrast sondern auf das Zusammenfließen in eine ruhige, harmonische Gesamtwirkung berechnet sein.”[17]

The overall effect, not its contrasting details, should determine the appearance of the interior. Its furnishing has to undergo a process of shading, indicating an aesthetic strategy that can be found in various places. Especially doors and windows risk to stand out from the walls’ “ruhige[m] Hintergrund”[18] which had been shaded – “abgetönt”[19]. By harmonizing their colours these openings have to be integrated in the continuum of the interieur. Apparent “Lücken” und “Löcher”[20] – as Falke asserts in a most revealing way – would disturb “[den] Eindruck des Isolirten und vollkommen Abgeschlossenen”[21] typically claimed for the nineteenth century’s interior.

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Indeed, Falke’s principles of harmonization are symptomatic of the aesthetic approach to the interior. They can be related to another document that deals with the topic of the interior. However, this example is found not within a practical, but within a fictional context. As far as the principles of furnishing are concerned, Adalbert Stifter’s voluminous

novel *Der Nachsommer*, published in 1857, raises very much the same issue as *Die Kunst im Hause*. Similar to what Falke's notion of the ideal interior suggested, Stifter's "Rosenhaus" is marked by isolation and artificiality. Its rose-covered outside is a major concern of Risach, the owner of the house, who ceaselessly strives to keep every irregularity out from its perfect surface. The same in the interior furnishing: The interior, its furniture and the various objects match to an extent that excludes every chance of unharmonious disruption. Undoubtedly, Risach's arranging activities have some principal poetological implications for Stifter's oeuvre. Risach's interior is sealed up in the very same way that the narration tends to eliminate all references to reality and its conflicts. [22] Within this isolation, an alternative, artificial order of perfection is established. In terms of poetics, this hermetic, non-referential order engenders the devices of autopoetic writing, dealing with language and the conditions of representation as such. Especially Stifter's late novels adopt an austere quality – which has been stated many times. [23] I assume that this poetic approach, which prefigures an essential quality of modern literature, is produced at the very moment when authors deal with the representation of the interior. Stifter's aesthetic program seems to have its origin, or at least one of its origins, in the interior.

When Risach shows his young visitor Heinrich Drendorf around, it is striking how constantly the interior decoration is considered as harmonizing – "passend" [24]. For the restoration of old pieces of furniture, their harmonious arrangement and subtle fitting together represents an important part of the novel's descriptions. A brief exchange of words between Risach and Heinrich is particularly telling. It takes place in another house that Risach had furnished, the "Sternenhof". Heinrich: "Waren gleich die altertümlichen Geräte nicht schöner als die bei meinem Gastfreunde – ich glaube, schönere wird es kaum geben – , so zeigte sich hier eine Zusammenstimmung [...] ,Aber daß Ihr die Geräte so zusammen gefunden habt, daß sie wie ein Einziges stimmen, ist zu verwundern', sagte ich. ,Also empfindet Ihr, daß sie stimmen?' erwiderte er. ,Seht, das ist mir lieb, daß Ihr das sagt. [...]" [25]

Here the contemplation of the interior includes both an aesthetic program and an educational method. Both aim at "ein Einziges" – or to be more precise – the effect of harmony produced by "Zusammenstimmung". Furthermore, this passage makes clear that the program of "Zusammenstimmung" tends to create hermetic situations. Solely elements of the same kind make a good match; heterogeneous ones are rigidly excluded from representation. Heinrich himself is taught to fit into the scheme: He is taught to agree, while correspondingly recognizing the artistic coherence of the decoration. Not just the furniture matches; the old and the young man use the same words. Their dialogue appears as the characteristic, almost tautological consent Stifter often produces in his writings. Repeating the remark that the objects in the "Rosenhaus" match, multiplying words and phrases that have just been pronounced, Stifter's novels withdraw the chance to vary different elements in favour of the identical and its duplication.

In relation to this textual device it is significant to note that *Der Nachsommer* represents a late example of the "Bildungsroman" genre. In Stifter's novel, however, personal development does not mean opposing the world. [26] Quite the reverse – it means

increasing the similarity bit by bit. By marrying Risach's fostered daughter Nathalie, Heinrich becomes part of the family, literally going to reproduce the pattern Risach created; by following his example Heinrich will be able to arrange his private world in a harmonious way. Heinrich is instructed in a behaviour that was shaped, so to speak, in the interior.

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In *Der Nachsommer* the constitution of the subject is closely intertwined with the construction of private space. Risach's "Rosenhaus" is the scene of education and successive personal perfection. At a closer look, however, the program of "Zusammenstimmung" lays bare the aporetic constellation of which it is part. Imaginations of unity cannot do without their perturbing counterpart – fragmentation. From the very moment that Heinrich intends to prove himself by trying to restore an old work of art in Risach's way, the plan to perfectly harmonize the scattered and destroyed bits has to confront its own impossibility. Heinrich is not able to regain the missing parts of the object; although Risach intervenes by having these parts sophisticatedly imitated, they fail to reestablish the conserved fragments as a whole. The addition of the copies to the original parts is beyond the novel's horizon. Finally, it has to be stressed that Heinrich's attempts do not focus on any random work of art: What he is obsessively trying to complete is the wooden panelling of an ancient chamber. These broken "Wandverkleidungen"[27] do not only embody the disintegration of the house, its furniture and its inhabitants, i.e. the dissociation of a traditional unit. The narration of panellings also shows that the reintegration and harmonization of what has been dispersed in the course of modernization – including the autonomous subject – ultimately can not be achieved.

Notes:

1. Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl: *Die Familie*. 2nd ed. Stuttgart/Augsburg 1855, p. 235.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., 189.

5. Cf. Cornelia Klinger: "Modern/Moderne/Modernismus." In: *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe. Historisches Wörterbuch in sieben Bänden*. Ed. by Karlheinz Barck et al. Stuttgart/Weimar: 2000ff. Bd 4, p. 121-167.

6. Wolfram Groddeck: *Reden über Rhetorik. Zu einer Stilistik des Lesens*. Basel/Frankfurt a. M. 1995, p. 110-114.

7. Cornelia Klinger: *Flucht, Trost, Revolte. Die Moderne und ihre ästhetischen Gegenwelten*. München, 1995.

8. Theodor W. Adorno: "Nachwort." In: Walter Benjamin: *Berliner Kindheit um neunzehnhundert*. Frankfurt a. M. 1987, p. 111.

9. Walter Benjamin: *Das Passagen-Werk*. Ed. by R. Tiedemann. Frankf. a. M. 1983, p. 52. Cf. Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project*. Trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, Mass./ London 1999, pp. 8-9: "For the private individual, the place of dwelling is for the first time opposed to the place of work. The former constitutes itself as the interior. Its complement is the office. The private individual, who in the office has to deal with reality, needs the domestic interior to sustain him in his illusions. [...] From this arise the phantasmagorias of the interior – which, for the private man, represents the universe. In the interior, he brings together the far away and the long ago."

10. Riehl, 169.

11. Georg Simmel: *Philosophie des Geldes*. Ed. by D. P. Frisby and K. Ch. Köhnke. Frankfurt a. M. 1989, p. 491.

12. Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*, 296.

13. Ibid., p. 286.

14. Jacob von Falke: *Die Kunst im Hause. Geschichtliche und kritisch-ästhetische Studien über die Decoration und Ausstattung der Wohnung*. 3rd ed. Wien 1877, p. 2.

15. Ibid., p. 179.

16. Cf. David E. Wellbery: "Stimmung." In: *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe. Historisches Wörterbuch in sieben Bänden*. Ed. Karlheinz Barck et al. Stuttgart/Weimar: 2000ff. Bd 5, pp. 703-733.

17. Falke, 290-291.

18. Ibid., 178.

19. Ibid., 221.

20. Ibid., 246.

21. Ibid., 268.

22. Cf. Kirsten L. Belgum: "High Historicism and Narrative Restoration: The Seamless Interior of Adalbert Stifter's 'Nachsommer'." In: *The Germanic Review* 67 (1992), pp. 15-25.

23. Cf. for example Albrecht Koschorke und Andreas Ammer: "Der Text ohne Bedeutung oder die Erstarrung der Angst. Zu Stifters letzter Erzählung 'Der fromme Spruch'." In: *DVJS* 61 (1987), pp. 676-719.

24. Adalbert Stifter: *Der Nachsommer*. Frankfurt a. M. 1982, p. 274.

25. Ibid., 278. Cf. Adalbert Stifter: *Indian Summer*. Transl. by Wendell Frye. Bern 2006, p. 171; “Although the antique furniture here was not any more beautiful than what was at my host’s house – I hardly think there could be any more beautiful – here there was a harmony [...] I replied, ‘But it is remarkable that you found and arranged the pieces of furniture to harmonize as a whole.’ ‘You feel they harmonize?’ he replied. ‘Well, I’m very happy to hear you say that. [...]’”

26. Marianne Schuller: “Das Gewitter findet nicht statt oder Die Abdankung der Kunst. Zu Adalbert Stifters Roman ‘Der Nachsommer’.” In: *Poetica 10* (1978), pp. 25-52.

27. Adalbert Stifter: *Der Nachsommer*. Frankfurt a. M. 1982, p. 340.

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