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# Ulf Erdmann Ziegler's *Wilde Wiesen*. A novel of space and memory\*

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“Den Raum des Lebens – bios – graphisch in einer Karte zu gliedern”<sup>1</sup> is an idea that in 1932 Walter Benjamin confesses to having already had for quite some time. In 2007, his intuition seemed to echo once again within *Wilde Wiesen*, Ulf Erdmann Ziegler's second novel, a work that is distinctly autobiographical in character and centered on memories of a childhood and youth that unfolds between the nineteen-sixties and the early nineteen-eighties.<sup>2</sup>

The subtitle of Ziegler's text is telling: “Autogeographie”,<sup>3</sup> a neologism of programmatic character that indicates the “Mischung aus einer Autobiographie und einer Geographie”<sup>4</sup> and as such defines a new literary genre. In *Wilde Wiesen*, the author attempts to have the past speak through space<sup>5</sup> and, in the attempt to answer the question “ob die Orte eigentlich die Menschen prägen, oder ob die Menschen die Orte”,<sup>6</sup> blazes a path through ten chapters – corresponding to as many urban spaces – perceived by the first person narrator as stations of life and of memory. Ziegler's autogeography is organized as if it were “eine animierte Landkarte”<sup>7</sup> of the subject; or rather, as

\*Translation by Alexander Booth.

<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Berliner Chronik*, edited by Gershom Scholem (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Ulf Ziegler was born in 1959 in Neumünster, in Schleswig-Holstein, and studied German literature at the Free University of Berlin. Interested in photography, design, and architecture, in the nineteen-nineties he worked as an editor for the “TAZ” newspaper. His first novel, *Hamburger Hochbahn* (2007), enjoyed considerable success. In 2008 Ziegler won the Friedrich Hebbel prize.

<sup>3</sup> Ulf Ziegler, *Wilde Wiesen* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Video interview with Ulf Erdmann Ziegler, <http://bachmannpreis.eu/de/autoren/11>.

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. Ulf Ziegler, *Glück und frühes Leid. Zur Debatte um die Gegenwart in der Literatur*, in [perlentaucher.de](http://www.perlentaucher.de) Das Kulturmagazin, <http://www.perlentaucher.de/essay/glueck-und-fruehes-leid.html>. *Wilde Wiesen* can be traced back to previous attempts at connecting life experiences and the spatial dimension as, for example, Walter Benjamin's *Berliner Kindheit um neunzehnhundert* (1938) or Peter Handke's *Der kurze Brief zum langen Abschied* (1972).

<sup>6</sup> Video interview with Ulf Erdmann Ziegler, cit.

<sup>7</sup> Ulf Ziegler, *Wilde Wiesen*, cit., inside front cover.



the result of a process of self-perception and self-representation upon a spatial base which, in anchoring life to its settings, seeks to remedy the transient nature of memory and the precariousness of individual identity. “Orte sind verlässliche Zeugen. [...] Sie sind die Oberflächen auf denen die Spuren noch sichtbar sind, die Generationen, die längst erloschen sind, hinterlassen haben”.<sup>8</sup> But can the solidity of places truly help the subject orient himself within the fluidity of memories in which his identity is rooted? Ziegler’s attempt to write and order life upon a spatial basis seems to suggest the affirmative. Yet, in reality, the text reveals how a bio-graphical chart designs itself and is to be read differently than a geo-graphical one; and furthermore, how the “traces” that cut through the I are less “trustworthy” witnesses than those investigated by historiography.

Organizing an account of a life upon a spatial basis implies an abandoning of chronological order and an implicit refusal of every form of a philosophy of history. Indeed, *Wilde Wiesen*’s narration is fragmentary, often imprecise in its temporal coordinates of events, and characterized by a confused stratification of the past and sporadic, brief excursions within the present. Revisiting the place-keepers of his history, the first person narrator comes across as a disorganized “Vergangenheitstourist seiner eigenen Kindheit und Jugend, der sich dort über Jahrzehnte hinweg selbst begegnet”.<sup>9</sup>

If it is true that “les souvenirs sont immobile, d’autant plus solides qu’ils sont mieux spatialisés”,<sup>10</sup> the narrative modality Ziegler adopts opens the objectivity of the spaces themselves (and therefore the veracity of memories associated to them) up to discussion in the moment in which they are visited by the protagonist alone in his memory without any external verification. The selection, the transience, and the arbitrariness that characterize the recalling of the past also infect the representation of space and render it irregular, disor-

<sup>8</sup> Karl Schlögel, *Im Raume lesen wir die Zeit. Über Zivilisationsgeschichte und Geopolitik* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 2003), p. 370.

<sup>9</sup> Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit. Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik* (Munich: Beck, 2006), p. 217.

<sup>10</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *La poétique de l’espace* (Paris: Presse Universitaires de France, 1961), p. 28.



dered, deceptive, and centered upon certain details only, which are often of a secondary nature. Neither the life of the protagonist nor that life's settings are recounted in an organic and thorough manner.

In regard to *Wilde Wiesen*, Ulf Ziegler affirms: "Ich bin fortgeschritten von der Psychologie der Familie zur Soziologie des Ortes und zur Geschichte der Nation, aber all das in kleinsten Dosierungen".<sup>11</sup> Opening up tiny ruptures within Germany's past, the author in fact amplifies the perspective and inserts the first person narrator's experiences into that of the entire nation. In spite of Ziegler's intentions, the personal past clearly prevails over the collective one because of precise stylistic and narrative choices: the centrality of the average family, the ten places in which the narrative unfolds (an exclusively private theatre of events), and, last but not least, the recurrence of the infant's truthful and pliable point of view, which takes in only that which he and his circle experience.

The principal role is therefore fulfilled by that which Aleida Assmann defines as the "Ich-Gedächtnis",<sup>12</sup> shared by the author and his character on account of the coincidence of their names.<sup>13</sup> The *Ich-Gedächtnis* attempts "Erinnerungen bewusst aufzurufen und ihnen die Form einer Erzählung zu geben".<sup>14</sup> This "bewusste[...] Re-Konstruktionsarbeit",<sup>15</sup> which calls for a "soziale Komponente"<sup>16</sup> in as much as it posits a consumer, is precisely what Ziegler is attempting

<sup>11</sup> Video interview with Ulf Erdmann Ziegler, cit. As the inside front cover of the novel points out, the historical references concern in a particular way "die deutsche Teilung, das Drama der Flucht, das Auftauchen der Baader-Meinhof-Gruppe, die Ära der 'Jesus People'".

<sup>12</sup> Aleida Assmann, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

<sup>13</sup> Both of them are named Ulf Ziegler. The detail that, in relation to *Wilde Wiesen's* protagonist, they do not share the second name of 'Erdmann', however, could be considered a sign of an incomplete identity. A few reviews have underlined the lack of correspondence between the real biographical path and the literary one, without, however, explaining such an affirmation (see, for example, Edo Reents, *Wilde Wiesen*, in "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung", Oct. 23, 2007; Roman Bucheli, *Das Alphabet der Herkunft. Ulf Erdmann Ziegler schreibt eine 'Autogeographie'*, in "Neue Züricher Zeitung", Dec. 20, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> Aleida Assmann, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

<sup>15</sup> *Ivi*, p. 123.

<sup>16</sup> *Ivi*, p. 120.



to realize in *Wilde Wiesen*, sketching for the reader a bio-graphical chart made up of images of places and of life marked by linguistic signs. In fact, the three constitutive elements of Ulf Ziegler's topography are precisely memory, word, and space.

Assmann continues:

Ein wesentlicher Aspekt des Erinnerens [... ist die] permanente Umkodierung von Vorbewusstem in Bewusstes, von Sinnlichem in Sprachliches und Bildliches, von Bildern und Sprache ins Schriftliches usw. [...] Ja, wir können geradezu sagen: *erinnern ist übersetzen*.<sup>17</sup>

In *Wilde Wiesen*, traces of the *Umkodierung* are to be found precisely in the close bond between place and memory, a bond that becomes known through processes of “transition” revealed by the text (memory's passage from the unconscious to the conscious level, the rationalization of memories in an artistic project, the transformation of mental images of the past into literary images through writing). One could therefore affirm that Ziegler's autogeography is based upon processes of “translation” through which the subject attaches himself to places in order to bring into focus the tiles that make up the mosaic of his past. In this regard, it is interesting to also consider the double meaning of the word *übersetzen*: “translate” and “ferry, carry over to the other shore”. Both the linguistic and the spatial factor are condensed within this verb, just as in *Wilde Wiesen* they are essential for giving form to memory within the literary work.

The same etymology of the lemma “geography” brings to light the relationship that this discipline establishes between space and word.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *Ivi*, p. 124.

<sup>18</sup> The term γεωγραφία (*geōgraphía*) is made up of two forms that, in Greek, do not exist as autonomous words: the first, , γεω- (*geō-*), is connected to ‘earth’, the second, -γραφία (*-graphía*), to ‘I write’, ‘I draw’, ‘writing’, ‘painting’. ‘Geografia’ indicates the “Wissenschaft von der Erdoberfläche, Erdbeschreibung”. See *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Deutschen*, edited by the Zentralinstitut der Sprachwissenschaft, Berlin, under Wolfgang Pfeifer (Munich: DTV, 1995), p. 428. For further examinations, see also *Raum. Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch*, edited by Stephan Günzel (Stuttgart - Weimar: Metzler, 2010), pp. 24-60.



De-scribing the world on the scientific plane through linguistic and cartographic means is precisely the point of geography; de-scribing the subject on an artistic-literary level through exclusively linguistic instruments is Ulf Ziegler's. In *Wilde Wiesen* the word dominates, becomes itself image when it evokes episodes of the past set within their scenes and when these similarly recreate the snapshots taken by the passionate young photographer-protagonist. Autogeography is thus, on a structural level as well, a sort of memory album in which cartography and photography are united in writing, and offer the reader a gallery of images without any solution of continuity.

The word is at the service of space so that it can be depicted; in an analogous manner, space comes to the help of the word, in so much as "[sich] die Sprache räumlicher Relationen als eines der grundlegenden Mittel zur Deutung der Wirklichkeit [erweist]".<sup>19</sup> That which Ziegler desires to represent in *Wilde Wiesen* – or rather, the passing (*übersetzen*) of a subject from the *wir* (we), which opens the novel, to the *ich* (I) that concludes it – is also rendered through a marked tendency to the spatialization of linguistic expression. There are numerous examples: life is depicted as a path ("Lebensspur"),<sup>20</sup> the experience in the Berliner borough of Neukölln is a re-visitation of the traditional image of the crossroads (or rather, it is seen as the "Flur"<sup>21</sup> of a metaphysical prison that leads to either "Wissen, Geld und Ruhm"<sup>22</sup> or "Trunksucht, Liebe und Verbrechen"),<sup>23</sup> the first years of life are condensed within the metaphor of the "Garten meiner Kindheit",<sup>24</sup> which is contrasted to that of "Schule",<sup>25</sup> itself understood as a projection into space of the life of the protagonist's older brothers, parents, and, in general, a more mature and conscious age.<sup>26</sup> The spatialization of

<sup>19</sup> Yuri M. Lotman, *Die Struktur literarischer Texte*, trans. by Rolf Dietrich Keil (Munich: Fink, 1993), p. 313. Schlögel gives some examples: "Sich hineinstürzen. Sich los-sagen. Sich davonmachen [...]" (Karl Schlögel, *op. cit.*, p. 369).

<sup>20</sup> Ulf Ziegler, *Wilde Wiesen*, cit., p. 93.

<sup>21</sup> *Ivi*, p. 120.

<sup>22</sup> *Ivi*, p. 121.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 20, 21, 22.

<sup>25</sup> *Ivi*, p. 21.

<sup>26</sup> The protagonist, youngest of three brothers, perceives the beginning of his scholastic career as the passing (*übersetzen*) of one phase of life into another and as a



language also includes the depiction of by now frayed familial relationships (thanks to the image of the “wall”, which comes back with important implications at the close of the novel as well),<sup>27</sup> his first homosexual experiences (seen as the crossing of a “border”)<sup>28</sup> and of his assimilation into his American host family during a scholastic year in Iowa (through the symbols of “roots” and “fabric”).<sup>29</sup> Even the temporal dimension sometimes anchors itself linguistically to space as the individual, familial, or historical memory of the past demonstrates.<sup>30</sup>

In *Wilde Wiesen* language too is seen in its spatial dimension, as the memory of two important stations of the narrator’s life depict: learning how to write in German as a child and learning a foreign language in the United States as an adolescent. The text gives a lot of attention to the controversy in the protagonist’s family as to the num-

factor of inclusion within his family of origin where his father is employed by a school in Schleswig-Holstein. The narrator indeed affirms: “Nun hatte ich es also geschafft und war nicht mehr der, der im Garten spielte, während der Vater und der Bruder und die Schwester in die Schule durften. Ich war eingetreten in den innern Kreis der Familie, die Loge” (*ivi*, p. 32). In relation to gardens, however, it is important to note that, regardless of the short but frequent mention of green spaces, the urban environment figures primarily in the text. The geographic map of the subject delineated within the novel is in any event political and not physical. Furthermore, it is important to mention the fact that the *Garten meiner Kindheit* comes back to mind thanks to a black and white snapshot that immortalizes a banal childhood episode in the protagonist’s life. Photography places the mechanism of memory recovery in an important role, in as much as it spatializes memories by fixing them to a surface and thereby grants the individual “physical” access to his or her past. It is then the task of the narrator to translate this image into words and share it with the reader.

<sup>27</sup> “Die Erwachsenen der Familie [standen] uns gegenüber [...] wie eine Wand; Bert [der Bruder] und ich [...] begannen ein paralleles Leben” (*ivi*, p. 76). The wall is also connected to the idea of “cut” and “fracture”: “Es gab einen Riss: auf der einen Seite wir [Kinder] und auf der anderen Seite die Eltern” (*ivi*, p. 75).

<sup>28</sup> “Nie hatten wir [der Erzähler und sein Freund] an diese Grenze gewagt” (*ivi*, p. 18).

<sup>29</sup> “Ich begann, in der [amerikanischen] Ebene, Wurzeln zu schlagen” (*ivi*, p. 104) and “ich verstand, mich einweben zu lassen in die Faser dieser Familie, dieser Stadt und dieses Landes” (*ivi*, p. 102).

<sup>30</sup> An example upon the familial plane is offered by the following passage: “Wenn es nach mir gegangen wäre, hätte der Landstrich, der Vergangenheit bedeutete, von



ber of “legs” the letters *m* and *n* have. The second day of school the teacher applies an innovative method no longer based on the learning of each individual sign, but rather, of entire words: “Ich kam nach Hause und konnte ‘ich’”,<sup>31</sup> the narrator recalls. The subject’s foundations in any event seem to have been thrown off, but the “construction” of the I soon reveals itself to be much more problematic than it presently appears, and not only from the point of view of graphic realization. That which interests the young student is not, however, so much the signified – destined to remain rather obscure to him in the future as well – as much as the signifier (“was Buchstaben voneinander unterscheidet, [...] das war es schließlich, was ich wissen wollte”),<sup>32</sup> and this is demonstrated by the heated discussion with his parents on the writing of the two nasal consonants. On the one hand this episode indicates the fracture within his family that occurs when Ulf abandons the “garden of youth” and ventures into autonomous spaces (represented metaphorically here by

sämtliche Karten gelöscht werden können” (*ivi*, p. 40). The historical plane, on the contrary, is appointed principally to the German Democratic Republic and its collapse. In the case of the GDR, there is a process of ideologization of space. In order to describe a trip beyond the Wall, the geographical repositioning coincides with a sort of trip backwards in time: “Wir [die Familie] also im Sommer oder Herbst 1973 sitzen im Zug oder im Auto, fahren zurück in die Vorzeit” (*ivi*, p. 47). One notices the imprecision of the memory that characterizes this affirmation. Unessential details are reported in order to evoke once again the transient nature of memory and to reaffirm implicitly the necessity of hanging on to the security conjured up by place). The end of Germany’s division is instead depicted in the following way: “Es war, als wäre der Himmel aufgerissen und die ordnende Hand der Geschichte wäre niedergefallen zur Erde, um sämtliche Knoten auf einmal zu lösen” (*ivi*, p. 43). In both of these quotations one notices the usage of the verb *fahren*, which indicates movement with some kind of vehicle. The spatial component of travel is connected to the mechanical one and brings one’s attention back to the almost obsessive attention that the text dedicates to automobiles, to trams, to bicycles and almost any other means of transport. “Das ganze Leben besteht aus Bewegungen im Raum” (Karl Schlögel, *op. cit.*, p. 368) and Ulf Ziegler is attracted by all of that which favors or allows them. As to the concept of distance and its perception in relation to means of transport, see Stephen Kern, *The culture of time and space. 1880-1918* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1983), pp. 211-240.

<sup>31</sup> Ulf Ziegler, *Wilde Wiesen*, cit., p. 24.

<sup>32</sup> *Ivi*, p. 25.



the conquering of the written word); on the other, it highlights the existence of the physical dimension of language (as a collection of signs, segments, and angles) destined to transmit the physical dimension of memory through the text.

Here it is important to mention an observation of the high-school aged Ulf who, in Oklahoma City, is dedicating himself ever more to the learning of English: “Ich [konnte] zum zweiten mal in meinem Leben eine Sprache lernen [...]; nicht das Skelett der Sprache, sondern ihr Fleisch”.<sup>33</sup> The word is not only sign, but also “body”. It is precisely this “physicality” which amplifies the spatiality of language and allows one to intuit the subject’s capacity to move in an up until that point alien reality thanks to the ripeness of the acquired language. The word, depicted in the text on a spatial basis, is thus a sort of “door” consenting access to places, people, and memory. This architectural element occurs with great frequency in the representation of numerous habitations that people the text.<sup>34</sup> “Doors symbolize the scene of passing from one state to another, from one world to another, from the known to the unknown [...]. [B]ut they have a dynamic psychological quality for they not only indicate a threshold but invite us to cross it”;<sup>35</sup> in Ulf Ziegler’s novel, the same function is carried out by memory – itself able to open or close the channel that joins yesterday to today – as much as it is by language, the instrument that is indispensable in the interaction between the I and the not-I, the world of young children and the world of adults, family and external reality, the national sphere and that of foreign countries, imminence and transcendence, past and present.

These considerations allow the introduction of one of the most important settings in the entire novel, the one the narrator’s attention

<sup>33</sup> *Ivi*, p. 101.

<sup>34</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 5, 56, 98, 109, 124.

<sup>35</sup> Jeane Chevalier - Alain Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*, second edition, trans. by John Buchanan-Brown (London: Penguin, 1966), p. 422. In *Wilde Wiesen*, a similar interest is reserved for windows (Ulf Ziegler, *Wilde Wiesen*, cit., pp. 7, 16, 51, 56, 109, 124, 138) in as much as they “open to air and light” and thus “symbolize receptivity” (Jeane Chevalier - Alain Gheerbrant, *op. cit.*, p. 1112). Both doors and windows do not only have, however, a comprehensive function; they both, in fact, can close off spaces and thus generate exclusion.



focuses upon in every single chapter: the dwelling. The house is "notre premier univers",<sup>36</sup> embodies "le valeurs de l'espace habité",<sup>37</sup> is configured like "le non-moi qui protège le moi"<sup>38</sup> and connects the subject to his past in a double bind, since it is within that house that "un grand nombre de nos souvenirs sont logés".<sup>39</sup> The precise location of memories within their settings, which is at the very heart of *Wilde Wiesen*, cannot be seen as separate from domestic spaces, for it is precisely in the house that "[l']intégration [de...] les pensées, les souvenirs et les rêves de l'homme"<sup>40</sup> resides. Furthermore, the narrator's insistence on the great number of places he lived as a child seem to fix the image of the house as a "shell", a characteristically 19<sup>th</sup> century image that found itself abandoned in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century only to be taken up again with renewed vigor at its ending:<sup>41</sup> indeed, *Wilde Wiesen's* protagonist needs a "Futtermal"<sup>42</sup> for his intimate life and for his past, a place which could condense, protect, and relocate individual identity and memory into an objective dimension so that they can be "translated" (*übersetzt*) within the literary work.

It is also interesting to note that the depiction of those dwellings – synthetic, limited to isolated details and with a particular attention to windows and doors, the furniture, and the arrangement of the rooms – presents characteristics analogous to those of a cartographic projection: it is reductive, symbolic, and approximative.<sup>43</sup> The new genre of the autogeography also influences the descriptive means adopted by the text. "La maison est un corps d'images qui donnent à l'homme des raisons ou des illusions de stabilité",<sup>44</sup> just as in *Wilde Wiesen* solid domestic walls seem to be invoked to check the

<sup>36</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ivi*, p. 27.

<sup>40</sup> *Ivi*, p. 26.

<sup>41</sup> Karl Schlögel, *op. cit.*, p. 326.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Cfr. Bruno Cornaglia - Emilio Lavagna, *Elementi di geografia generale* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1994), p. 7.

<sup>44</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *op. cit.*, p. 34.



difficulties that the I has in constructing a stable image of itself. This stabilizing function connects the house to writing since the latter too – supported by a marked tendency of the text to spatialization – is dedicated to the fight against memory’s fragility and to fix the subject’s identity onto paper. Both the dwelling and the written word are thus perceived as a kind of antidote to the precariousness and fleeting nature of memory.

There are two other characteristics of the house, identified by Bachelard, that in Ziegler’s text assume a particularly pregnant role. The first is verticality,<sup>45</sup> which connects the spatial plane of the edifice to the temporal one of memory in virtue of the trip backwards into the profound depths of the individual’s past. The second is centrality,<sup>46</sup> which in *Wilde Wiesen* is openly negated. The places in which the protagonist resides (whose names, again, provide the titles for the novel’s chapters) are in fact almost exclusively suburbs or the outlying areas of differently sized cities: Lindenthal (Cologne), Einfeld (Neumünster), Pillnitz (Dresden), Orschel-Hagen (Reutlingen), Tugendorf (Neumünster), Neukölln (Berlin), Schwedenschanze (Constance), and Dorstfeld (Dortmund). Ulf Ziegler’s path winds through a sequence of urban centers that occupy a peripheral position on the geographical map of Germany as well: from Schleswig-Holstein (extreme north), to North Rhine-Westphalia (west), Baden-Württemberg (south), and Berlin (east). The province is therefore configured like a “Lebensform oder zumindest Prägestempel”,<sup>47</sup> and the peripheral element becomes “auch eine innere Kathegorie”.<sup>48</sup>

There are few exceptions to this out-and-out “Protokoll der Provinz”.<sup>49</sup> One is constituted by a chapter entitled “Neumünster”, “die erste deutsche Stadt, in der [...Ulf] wohnte”.<sup>50</sup> Here, however, the narration is for the most part dedicated to the boy’s high-school years

<sup>45</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 34-35: “La maison est imaginée comme un être vertical. Elle s’élève. Elle se différencie dans le sens de sa verticalité.”

<sup>46</sup> *Ivi*, p. 35: “La maison est imaginée comme un être concentré. Elle nous appelle à une conscience de centralité.”

<sup>47</sup> Ingo Arend, *Im Dickicht der Normalität*, in “Der Freitag”, Jan. 18, 2008.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Ulf Ziegler, *Wilde Wiesen*, cit., inside front cover.

<sup>50</sup> *Ivi*, p. 50.



when he still lives with his parents in Einfeld and travels back and forth; the centrality of the city apartment to which he later moves thus in its turn becomes a peripheral element of the story. Another exception is the chapter "OK City", in which the protagonist resides "in einem Haus [...] in der Mitte der Stadt, [...] inmitten einer Nation".<sup>51</sup> The reaffirmation of finding himself "in der Mitte des Landes"<sup>52</sup> makes the contrast between Oklahoma City and the novel's peripheral settings of German life even more evident. The theme of "finding oneself in the middle" is associated now to that of being typical ("ich war [...] im typischsten Haus Amerikas, in der typischsten Familie, in der typischsten Stadt"),<sup>53</sup> a state of being which levels individual differences and favors the protagonist's process of inclusion into American reality. "Being at the center" is thus a spatial metaphor of integration.

At the end of the scholastic year, Ulf is destined to return to the "periphery" from which he comes and from which he on two other occasions will attempt to flee: when he lives in an apartment in the center of Constance (the narrative does not linger on this particular detail, but instead goes on about the months of civil service in Schwedenschanze so much so that the chapter is even named after the tiny Swabian town), and when Ulf rents a room in the center of Dortmund in order to go to a school of photography, another place he, however, soon abandons in order to move with some friends to the suburb of Dorstfeld.<sup>54</sup>

It is clear how the character's missing centrality on the spatial plane reflects the condition of an all too unstable I condemned to circling around a middle point that organizes its existence without ever finding a fixed abode. Even though Ulf manages on some occasions to "connect himself to a center", he is unable to make this position permanent; the young man in fact pushes himself ever further into a progressive marginality that culminates in the Berlin borough of Neukölln where the degradation of the building and the

<sup>51</sup> *Ivi*, p. 105.

<sup>52</sup> *Ivi*, p. 102.

<sup>53</sup> *Ivi*, p. 105.

<sup>54</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 126 and 138.



urban environment mirror the I's profound unease. "Ich war an den Rand der Welt gezogen",<sup>55</sup> he affirms, underlining an isolation that very soon brings him to the margins of society and to being arrested while in the act of committing theft.<sup>56</sup> The narrator returns, on this occasion as well, to a spatial metaphor in order to synthesize the human misery of the subject: "Dann zeigt sich, dass ich Bewohner der obersten Wohnung bin, mit einer Öffnung zum Dachboden, zu den Dächern, all das meins, aber ungenutzt, eine gewaltige, uralte Konstruktion auf Balken, die sich biegen".<sup>57</sup> Even the house is no longer able to provide secure footing.

The limits of space to supply a valid and stable point to which to anchor the past and one's own identity had already surfaced earlier in the novel, even if it had only been implied. Ulf's elementary school teacher was in fact engaged in taking a series of aerial photographs of the area, which were to be released in book-form; when the work is published, however, there are no snapshots whatsoever portraying either Einfeld or its lake.<sup>58</sup>

In this way Ulf's geographical map of childhood is full of lacuna and shadow, which does not support the subject's orientation in his backward journey into memory. For not only is the area unsupported by photographic objectivity, even its name is "willkürlich".<sup>59</sup> The word can thus be confused and no longer constitute a strong bastion of identity. These few but important clues demonstrate that, as opposed to a geo-graphical map, a bio-graphical map lacks a scientific nature and can only offer an image spoiled by inexactitudes and (in)voluntary omissions. The solidity of the places of the past therefore risk being illusory, and the topography of the subject reveals itself to be much less reliable than that of the territory.

In addition, if the I that represents itself in the literary text is fragmented and irregular, the difficulty of outlining one of its or-

<sup>55</sup> *Ivi*, p. 114.

<sup>56</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 119-120.

<sup>57</sup> *Ivi*, p. 121.

<sup>58</sup> *Ivi*, p. 27.

<sup>59</sup> *Ivi*, p. 22. The name was supposed to have been "Neue Heimat" (*ivi*, p. 22), but then an unknown founder's proposal prevailed, and it was changed to Einfeld.



ganic and complete cartographic projections increases all the more. In *Wilde Wiesen* the subject's lack of unity is recognized in the name of the protagonist: as mentioned before, "Ulf Ziegler" designates both the author and the narrator, while "Ulf" also refers to the young handicapped man followed by the main character while completing his civil service and "Ziegler" to the inhabitant of Einfeld who lives within a scrap yard.<sup>60</sup> The partitioning of the I is found again in the name that the young protagonist discovers with horror neither corresponds to the single individual nor to a single family.<sup>61</sup>

The perhaps unconscious need to connect the different parts that make up the subject can help one to understand the frequent references to trips or to movements that characterize *Wilde Wiesen*. "Lebensbeschreibungen sind Bewegungsgeschichten"<sup>62</sup> that, within autogeography, often implicate the crossing of lines of demarcation. The concept of "border" is a "wesentliches Merkmal der Organisation einer räumlichen Struktur"<sup>63</sup> that Lotman identifies in poetic texts at a structural level and that Ulf Ziegler brings back up in an original manner. The "border" of *Wilde Wiesen*'s chapters is in fact also of a geographical character to the degree that it delimits the urban centers depicted within the space of the text. The cities or suburbs are, however, often also subdivided within themselves on the basis of a "binäre[n] semantische[n] Opposition"<sup>64</sup> in part determined by clear spatial reasons (the presence of various axes), in part due to barriers of a social, economic, or religious character, which are concretely reflected in the urban space.<sup>65</sup>

Germany itself is involved in this act of partitioning due to its split into the German Democratic Republic and the Federal Republic

<sup>60</sup> Cfr. *ivi*, pp. 132, 123.

<sup>61</sup> *Ivi*, p. 23.

<sup>62</sup> Karl Schlögel, *op. cit.*, p. 368.

<sup>63</sup> Yuri M. Lotman, *op. cit.*, p. 327.

<sup>64</sup> *Ivi*, p. 337.

<sup>65</sup> The division into east and west of Neumünster is determined by the railway; that of Oklahoma City, on the other hand, by 23<sup>rd</sup> Street (Ulf Ziegler, *Wilde Wiesen*, *cit.*, pp. 62 and 103). The partitioning of Tugendorf is exemplified in the differences between the two religious communities that live there and is crystalized in their respective houses of worship (*ivi*, pp. 90-91). Furthermore, in Oklahoma City the northern



lic of Germany. As in the case of the aforementioned cities, the line of demarcation is connected to the interior of an originally solid territorial unity, whose fracturing has not been caused by the physical lay of the land, but by human intervention. If the dichotomies of north-south and east-west in the previously observed urban centers are due to territorial planning projects (the construction of various arteries, for example) and economic models based on class differences (with the lowest social levels relegated to disadvantaged sections), Germany's division into two distinct nations is the result of precise ideopolitical choices that reverberate across its geography. The dramatic effects which the birth of an internal border had upon the lives of millions of Germans are condensed by the narrator into a metaphor: "Und so begann sich zu zeigen, was die DDR gewesen war [...]: keine Landschaft und kein Land, sondern ein Virus oder ein Geflecht, etwas, das sich in den Körper setzt und ihn zu fressen beginnt".<sup>66</sup> Once again, reference is made to both the physical dimension (the infective agent) and the spatial one (the web).

Throughout the novel the reader is presented with numerous borders characterized by varying levels of permeability that allow the subject to relate in different ways to the alterity of the places: the "barriers" within the single urban centers can be transgressed without any limitation; on the contrary, whoever would cross the border which divides the city of Constance from that of the Swiss town of Kreuzlingen must first make it through four different checkpoints

and southern sections are distinguished by different levels of economic well-being: rich in the north (symbolized by the host family's modern and technological home. *Ivi*, p. 99), and poor in the south with its "arme[n] Strassen, ärmliche[n] Häuser, leeren und offenen" (*ivi*, p. 106). The differences here also have a racial character as the white host family lives in the north, while the southern streets are populated by black children (*ibid.*). The socio-economic conditions, betrayed by skin color, even characterize the division of Dorstfeld: the southern section of town is called "Negerdorf" on account of the poor miners blackened by coal dust, while the narrator refers to the northern section of town as "Schulfabrik" (*ivi*, p. 144) because the school of photography he frequents is located there. The school and the mine are therefore the spatial objectifications of the different urban areas.

<sup>66</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 44-45.



and only if not having any outstanding legal cases;<sup>67</sup> the border between the FRG and the GDR for its part is only passable to those who, having made it through thorough searches, possess the right papers and valid documents. The emotional baggage travelers carry is heavy, as the story of Ulf's father – who was originally from the east but had grown into adulthood in the west – illustrates: whenever he goes to visit his relatives in Dresden, he is gripped by fear when he has to show his green FRG passport to the border control guards.<sup>68</sup> The identity document amounts to the spatial objectification of the laceration (on both the emotional and geographical planes) that the existence of the two Germanys provokes within single individuals, families, and the entire German populace.

The recurrent division of the scenes of the novel into distinct parts makes the space reflect the fragmentation of the narrating subject while amplifying the sense of crumbling away and the lack of organic structure that pervades the text. Two fundamental aspects in the process of the I's definition of self, which Ulf Ziegler represents through the thematic nucleus of linguistic comprehension, are the individual's difficulty in inserting his or herself into a broken context and subsequent attempts at constructing "bridges" to overcome these interpersonal and geographical barriers.

Throughout the novel, the narrator lets a marked interest in the contrast of phonetic peculiarities and atypical dialectal expressions from his native region become known. He notes, for example, the long diphthongs from around the area of Lindenthal, the Thuringian words used by his parents, the soft consonants used by his grandmother from Gotha, the southern accent of the Protestant pastor in Tugendorf, and a phrase in dialect from Constance.<sup>69</sup> So, language presents distances and differences; and yet, at the same time, it manages to bring individuals closer together when their curiosity and

<sup>67</sup> *Ivi*, p. 126. While completing his civil service in Schwedenschanze, Ulf frequents the Swiss side of the Lake of Constance. The case of one of the protagonist's friends, however, is different: having avoided compulsory military service by moving to Switzerland, he risks arrest every time he is stopped at a checkpoint (*ivi*, p. 128).

<sup>68</sup> *Ivi*, p. 37.

<sup>69</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 10, 24, 69, 83, 123.



openness toward the other grants them the opportunity to open a channel of communication. This is above all evident in the American phase of Ulf's adolescence where integration into a new reality is at the same time facilitated and symbolized by the learning of English. The protagonist's greater familiarity with the language of Iowa is also noticed on the stylistic plane, seeing as the chapter "OK City" is strewn with foreign words like "microwave oven", "backyard", "jury", "woman", "prime time";<sup>70</sup> young Ulf's progressive process of inclusion into the reality of the United States is also underlined by the representational modalities the text adopts.

Knowledge of the American idiom is the last stop on a long journey of getting closer toward English, a journey that begins in infancy (when the words "THANK YOU"<sup>71</sup> on a gumball machine are "unaussprechbar und unverstandlich"),<sup>72</sup> continues on through adolescence (when the lyrics of American songs are still "Ratselworte aus einem fremden Land")<sup>73</sup> and ends in Iowa. It is important to mention here the function of "translation" that is to be found both in relation to lyrics from the USA that are rendered in German by a friend of Ulf's, as well as the biblical passages that are read and translated by the pastor Jedlicka during mass in Tugendorf.<sup>74</sup> The word *ubersetzen* returns with its multiplicity of significations: at the moment it appears only to refer to the linguistic plane, but in reality it is the determinant in the happy ending of "Ulf's making it to the other shore" of the ocean where the young man "moves" into a new phase of his life under the sign of a possible recomposition of the I.

The American house in which Ulf manages to live a day-to-day life that has about it the odor of integration, however, is recalled in the text as "mein letztes Zuhause. Danach war ich mir selbst ein Fremder".<sup>75</sup> The positive experience of insertion (symbolized by the

<sup>70</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 99, 100, 107.

<sup>71</sup> *Ivi*, p. 70.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ivi*, p. 85.

<sup>74</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 83-85.

<sup>75</sup> *Ivi*, p. 95.



domestic environment of the word *Zuhause*) is in reality only temporary, and does not coincide with that in which the subject is truly rooted; in addition, it has inauspicious consequences for a fragile individual without a sense of center. The sense of unfamiliarity and of isolation that follows his American sojourn is profound and is expressed through the linguistic dimension: one year later, the adolescent returns home and no longer knows how to speak German.<sup>76</sup> At that point, Ulf needs a “translator” of his own in order to cross the new “border” that separates him from his origins. The preexisting fragmentation of geographic, social, and linguistic ties was what caused the loss of identity in the first place and questioned the self-definition of the I.

Through the sharing of an idiom, *Wilde Wiesen* thus portrays the “proximity” between different geographical and human realities; through linguistic barriers, variations upon the theme of “border”, the text instead presents the incommunicability of varied existential conditions. The protagonist’s thoughts about the terrorists Baader and Meinhof is an example thereof: “Verblendete, die eine verbohrtete, unverständliche Sprache sprachen. Niemals würde ich so zu sprechen lernen”.<sup>77</sup> The refusal is radical and in no uncertain terms expresses the tendency to consider language as a code capable of uniting or dividing individuals on the basis of not only geographical affinity.

In this light, an episode from the protagonist’s childhood becomes all the more meaningful: during summer vacation, Ulf’s brother begins to defecate repeatedly in his trousers and is yelled at by their parents; once back at home

machte [er] nicht mehr in die Hose, und die Sache wurde, oder so schien es, vergessen. Stattdessen entwickelte er eine hastige, verkürzte Aussprache, die den Vater verzweifeln ließ, denn er verstand ihn nicht. [...] Manchmal wiederholte ich, was mein Bruder

<sup>76</sup> *Ivi*, p. 108. Even the protagonist’s sister had had a similar experience in Iowa but, in her case, the experience with the “other” had a less explosive effect and manifested only in a slight softening of her pronunciation.

<sup>77</sup> *Ivi*, p. 127.



gesagt hatte, so dass mein Vater es verstehen möge. Anfangs amüsierte ich mich leise. Später verstand ich ihn selbst nicht mehr.<sup>78</sup>

The conflictual situation amongst individuals is transferred to the plane of language and the word assumes the function of being a “door” able to close itself and to exclude the non-I. The “wall” – mentioned previously in relation to familial misunderstandings – now becomes a linguistic barrier raised by the subject as a sign of refusal; any possibility of “translation” that might allow one to open a long-lasting passageway is rejected.

The Berlin Wall has fallen, but that which separates individuals is difficult to destroy or only to be circumvented, as the novel’s final sentence reveals: “Ich fuhr Willis Saab gegen eine Wand, was Willi nicht störte, er hatte schon einen neuen”.<sup>79</sup> The crash shows that, in Ulf Ziegler’s life, the “wild meadows” evoked by the title and seen in Iowa are destined to being relegated to the plane of memory and to a space *autre*,<sup>80</sup> since “[das] Hier und Jetzt”,<sup>81</sup> that the protagonist loved as an adolescent, is studded with borders and barriers. The wall into which they crash at the end of *Wilde Wiesen* is the spatial objectification of the I’s inability to orient itself either in life or in its cartographic projection.

<sup>78</sup> *Ivi*, p. 76.

<sup>79</sup> *Ivi*, p. 151.

<sup>80</sup> *Ivi*, p. 96. The wild character of this slice of nature is, however, limited by the presence of a shopping center just a few hundred meters away. The freedom suggested is thus revealed to be transient and illusory from the very beginning.

<sup>81</sup> *Ivi*, p. 40.