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Martha B. Helfer

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# Arachnid Aesthetics: Gothtelf's *Die schwarze Spinne*



Martha B. Helfer

*Die schwarze Spinne* begins with a series of circular gestures, creating a sense of hermetic containment—a textual claustrophobia, even—as it introduces its supernatural storyline as terrifyingly real. Written in simple language and syntax, the narrative unfolds in a simple, linear progression that paradoxically resists straightforward summary: circularity permeates the text's structure and content, and is one of its defining and most unsettling features. At its core lies a corporeal curse that proves to be profoundly aesthetic in nature. A strong-willed woman named Christine dares vie with the Devil by slyly attempting to outwit him using linguistic deceit: a false oath that takes the form of a deferred promise, an indefinitely delayed *Ver-sprechen*. As punishment for her audacity she is first branded—marked by an invisible sign that gradually becomes perceptible in mutating, arachnid form—and then turned into a large, black, glowering spider who wreaks havoc on the local population and eventually is imprisoned in a darkened wooden window post, where she remains, invisible yet inscribed with the sign of her provenance, for over 600 years: a monstrous, lurking, ever-present threat to modernity.

This is the stuff of myth and legend, and its redaction ironically forms the basis of a nascent poetic realist aesthetic. Importantly, the text draws generative force from tales rooted in divine and diabolical deceit, and a dynamic process of inversion, of antithesis,<sup>1</sup> is at stake in

<sup>1</sup>As Keller astutely notes, “Antithesis is the fundamental conceptual principle as well as the structural and stylistic one of *Die schwarze Spinne*.” R. E. Keller, “Language and Style in Jeremias Gotthelf's *Die schwarze Spinne*,” *German Life and Letters* N.S. 10.1 (1956): 2–13; here 8.

their rewriting. Enwombed and entombed in wood, the spider woman Christine glosses the legend of Paracelsus, who is said to have tricked the Devil to great gain and entrapped him in spider form in a fir tree.<sup>2</sup> She likewise inverts the storyline of her mythical forebear Arachne, who boastfully and successfully challenges the weaver goddess Athena by creating a magnificent tapestry that depicts the many ways in which the gods have tricked mortals, and is spitefully transformed into a spider by her divinely jealous rival. Unlike Arachne, Christine does not weave. She is, however, a self-reflexive figure of *poiesis*, of serial production or creation: she gives birth to countless black spiders that, like her, are figures of destruction. Christine is both a serial producer and a serial killer and must be contained. And this is precisely the function of the narrative itself. *Die schwarze Spinne*, I will argue, is a narrative about containment and a narrative of containment.<sup>3</sup> In its circular, iterative language and structure it weaves together a deceptive, self-reflexive aesthetic that programmatically constructs poetic realism as serial containment, as artifice, as curse: as a controlled and controlling deviance from a darkly natural and deadly signifying order.

Published in 1842 by the Swiss pastor Albert Bitzianus, who wrote under the pen name Jeremias Gotthelf, *Die schwarze Spinne* is on the surface a cautionary morality story about the dangers of corrupt unchristian mores.<sup>4</sup> Originally intended as one in a series of historical-legendary tales, the narrative in its very conception is realist in nature, yet by design marks its fictional status from the start. Set in and around a farmhouse with a darkened window post that was standing, and readily identifiable, in Gotthelf's time, the narrative is painstakingly detailed in its lengthy authentic depiction of the baptismal festivities that inform the storyline on all levels; it also overtly references the Black Plague

<sup>2</sup>The 16th-century Swiss German polymath philosopher, physician, and astrologer—a model for Goethe's Faust—is said to have freed the Devil in spider form from a fir tree and was rewarded with tinctures that produce health and wealth; Paracelsus then tricked the Devil into reverting into spider form and imprisoned him again in the tree.

<sup>3</sup>For a recent discussion of "containment" as a defining feature of German realism, see Daniela Hückmann, ed., "Containment in Realism," *Germanic Review* 90.3 (2015). For analyses of *Die schwarze Spinne* that also discuss containment see William Collins Donahue, "The Kiss of the Spider Woman: Gotthelf's 'Matricentric' Pedagogy and Its (Post)war Reception," *German Quarterly* 67.3 (1994): 304–34; and Samuel Frederick, "God's Trash? Theodicy of Things and the Paradox of Productive Refuse in Jeremias Gotthelf's 'Die Wassernot im Emmental,'" *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 133 Sonderheft (2014): 261–84.

<sup>4</sup>Accordingly, most scholarship to date has focused on the text's didactic, religious, political, and social themes, interpreting its complex aesthetic structure primarily as a means for reinforcing its basic homiletic message. For a useful, if tendentious, overview of the secondary literature, see Michael Masanetz, "Kommentar" to Jeremias Gotthelf, *Die schwarze Spinne*, ed. Masanetz, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2007, 105–72; here 133–59.

that swept through the region in 1434, decimating the population.<sup>5</sup> The central character Christine, identified as a foreign woman from Lindau, likewise has historical precedent<sup>6</sup>; and the “truth” of the supernatural storyline is steadfastly asserted at key points in the narrative.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the text very obviously, if indirectly, draws on numerous literary sources: the myth of Arachne, the legend of Paracelsus, contemporaneous “black spider” tales circulating in Switzerland, biblical motifs linking spiders with wickedness and hypocrisy, and folkloric associations of the Devil with spiders.<sup>8</sup> As the basis of its poetic realist aesthetic Gotthelf’s narrative thus weaves together religion, legend, folklore, myth, magic, and historical fact and converts—and indeed inverts—established history into fiction: Hans von Stoffeln, the evil feudal lord who initiates the narrative’s dark action, in actuality was known as a “generous leader” who reigned from 1512 through 1527; he is commemorated on one of the church windows in Sumiswald, the municipality in Emmental in the Swiss canton of Bern that forms the backdrop for the tale.<sup>9</sup>

The text itself takes the form of a framed narrative—a standard structure for German poetic realism—yet deviates from this norm in its duplicity (and I use this term in both senses of the word). It actually has two frames and two interior narratives and—despite its overt inversion of historical fact—the text presents its supernatural narrative action as grounded in nature, as eminently natural. In its first frame the narrative begins with a description of nature and ends

<sup>5</sup>Masanetz 111. The narrative mentions the famous “Scheibentisch” in the “Bären” pub in Sumiswald (117), preserved (to this day) in memory of the two dozen plague survivors from a community of two thousand, who gathered around the round table. Parenthetical page citations here and throughout the essay refer to Jeremias Gotthelf, *Die schwarze Spinne*, Stuttgart: Reclam, 1969 (1994), which follows the less readily accessible critical edition, Jeremias Gotthelf, *Sämtliche Werke in 24 Bänden*, ed. Rudolf Hunziker and Hans Bloesch, Zurich: Eugen Rentsch, 1936.

<sup>6</sup>Masanetz 111.

<sup>7</sup>See in particular 26–27, 94, and 117.

<sup>8</sup>See Masanetz 111–12 for a concise discussion of literary sources for Gotthelf’s narrative, including two sagas and an eponymous “black spider” story by August Friedrich Ernst Langbein, published in 1819. Langbein’s “Die schwarze Spinne” is reprinted in Klaus Zobel, *Unerhörte Begebenheiten: Interpretationen und Analysen zu drei Novellen des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Northheim: Drei-A-Verlag, 1994, 149–66. I am less convinced than some scholars of the formative influence of Langbein’s story on Gotthelf’s text; see in particular Winfried Freund, *Literarische Phantastik: Die phantastische Novelle von Tieck bis Storm*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1990, 121. For a summary of the Swiss saga “Vo dr schwarze Spinnerle” see Walter Muschg, *Gotthelf: Die Geheimnisse des Erzählers*, Munich: Beck, 1931, 277–82; Muschg also notes that spiders are a common motif in Gotthelf’s oeuvre (207–10).

<sup>9</sup>H. M. Waidson, trans., *The Black Spider*. Richmond, Surrey: Oneworld Classics, 1958 (1980), viii.

with a description of that same nature, forming a structural circle. Its second frame, the narrative of the present (narrated in the past tense), reflects the nature narrative of the outer frame and encircles the two interior narratives—the narratives of the past, the supernatural narratives—which in turn reflect the second frame, the narrative of the present. In effect, the narrative is comprised of concentric circles that are fused together by a self-reflexive structure and by a storyline that cuts through and conjoins these concentric circles in an interlocking, multilayered narrative that entraps the reader in a hermeneutic circle, as it were: a complete understanding of the text is predicated on a complex dialectic between parts and whole. In short, in both form and function the text itself mimics a spider's web.<sup>10</sup>

In the middle of this textual web, at the nexus of these nestling, interwoven narrative circles, lurks the title figure, described as being nowhere and everywhere (84),<sup>11</sup> a natural and supernatural figure identified at the structural center of the text as a *Kreuzspinne* (61), a cross spider or cross spinner, an orb spider marked by a cross on its back. That this “cross” spider, a spider woman whose name is *Christine*, is both a savior and a devil figure, as well as the model for the domineering “master women,” the *Meisterweiber* (104) of the novel's second interior narrative, suggests that she functions as the text's master signifier—and certainly as a figure of chiasm, of crossing and inversion, a complex and deadly signifying figure who must be contained.

The signal importance of signification—or more precisely, the signal importance of the instability of signification—is underscored in the opening sections of the narrative's two frames, in those sections that *de facto* delimit, define, and contain both the text and its arachnid signifying ground. The first of these frames, the nature narrative, is written in a self-reflexive Romanticized style that arguably marks the text's artistic provenance. In both form and function it is comparable to the “Vorrede” of Stifter's *Bunte Steine*: it presents an aesthetic theory couched in natural terms that functions as a blueprint for reading the narrative that follows. The second frame, the narrative of the present, translates this theory into practice: in its lengthy depictions of the seemingly inconsequential details of a baptism and its attendant

<sup>10</sup>For an analysis that employs the metaphor of the spider web in a different context see Rosemary Picozzi Balfour, “Das Spinnengewebe der Zeit: Zur Interpretation von Gotthelfs *Die schwarze Spinne*,” *Seminar* 11.3 (1975): 157–69.

<sup>11</sup>Throughout this essay the English translations and paraphrases of Gotthelf's text are my own, though I have consulted both Waidson's translation, and, to a lesser extent, Jeremias Gotthelf, *The Black Spider*, trans. Susan Bernofsky, New York: New York Review of Books, 2013.

festivities, the second frame constructs a deliberately staid, realist aesthetic. Inscribed as it is in the first frame, the frame of nature, this realist aesthetic is presented as an outgrowth of nature, as inherently natural. In both frames the text's carefully controlled and controlling language and structure simultaneously foreground its fictional status, its inherent instability.

Gotthelf is not known for close attention to craft in the composition or editing of his manuscripts.<sup>12</sup> In the apt words of H. M. Waidson, *Die schwarze Spinne* "often gives a sense of being written in a fury of impetuosity."<sup>13</sup> Yet there is more to the text's language and structure than first meets the eye. And there is a reason why the narrative opens with a series of "rather faded Romanticisms"<sup>14</sup> about nature, marriage and reproduction, and then immediately devolves into a prolonged and "torturously detailed"<sup>15</sup> description of the preparations for an infant's baptism, the ritual that marks—and indeed ensures—the newborn's entry into the Christian order of things: the text narrates the birth of poetic realism from its Romantic roots,<sup>16</sup> and the baptismal process of naming, more precisely, of signification, is key to its aesthetic project.

## I

*Die schwarze Spinne* begins exquisitely slowly, excruciatingly slowly, weaving a gossamer web of deceptively simple language as it programmatically constructs its self-reflexive poetic realist agenda. The text opens with a remarkable circular sentence—reflected around a core

<sup>12</sup>See the "Textkritik" for *Die schwarze Spinne* in Gotthelf, *Sämtliche Werke in 24 Bänden*, vol. 17.2, ed. Hunziker and Bloesch, 460–78; here 460–62.

<sup>13</sup>In the introduction to his translation of Gotthelf's narrative, Waidson comments: "The writing in *The Black Spider* often gives a sense of being written in a fury of impetuosity which is careless of conventional grammar and syntax; Gotthelf is, as it were, creating his own language and style, as well as his own characters and action" (ix).

<sup>14</sup>G. T. Hughes, "Die schwarze Spinne as Fiction," *German Life and Letters* N.S. 9 (1955–56): 250–60; here 250.

<sup>15</sup>In a scathing review of Gotthelf's *Bilder und Sagen*, in which *Die schwarze Spinne* first appeared, the critic "O.S." condemned Gotthelf's writing style, noting his penchant for "marternde Detailmalerei, die zu quälender Langeweile führt." The review was published in August Lewald's *Europa. Chronik der gebildeten Welt* (Bd. 2, 1843, p. 96). Cited in Masanetz 120.

<sup>16</sup>In arguing that Gotthelf's narrative articulates a self-reflexive theory of poetic realism indebted to Romanticism, I follow Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's observation that post-Romantic literature and thought is fundamentally informed by early German Romanticism, which continues to shape our critical consciousness today, however much we try to "deny precisely this belonging." Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester. Albany: SUNY Press, 1988, 15.

chiasmic structure—that narrates the natural construction of metaphor, or the construction of metaphor as natural:

Über die Berge hob sich die Sonne, leuchtete in klarer Majestät in ein freundliches, aber enges Tal und weckte zu fröhlichem Leben die Geschöpfe, die geschaffen sind, an der Sonne ihres Lebens sich zu freuen. (3)

Notice the slowness introduced by the inverted syntax, the long, drawn-out build-up, “over the mountains,” to the subject of the sentence, the sun, the sun that “lifts itself” self-reflexively, the sun, the source of life and of light, the signifying center, as Derrida would have it, of Enlightenment.<sup>17</sup> Notice the introduction of the regal semantic register (“majesty”) into nature, which is also the making natural of royalty: metaphor is inherently political, and politics are mapped onto nature in this text.<sup>18</sup> Notice the repetition, the reflection, the serialization of fricative *fr* sounds—*freundlich*, *fröhlich*, *freuen*—that is, the complex interweaving of signifiers on both semantic and phonological levels of the text: acoustically and psychologically, “friendly,” “joyful,” “pleasing” connections are created in language here, binding together the sentence’s beginning, middle, and end in a resonant happy whole. This structurally staid Enlightenment totality is leisurely, ploddingly, and carefully constructed in a self-reflexive act of *poiesis*—of natural creation and natural poetic production—that is deliberately and painstakingly protracted. Notice the deferred action of the waking sun, the slowness of the text here, how long it takes for the sentence to spring into action, to get to its point, to its waking. Notice the redundancy, the self-reflexive structure of creation, “the creatures who are created,” “die Geschöpfe, die geschaffen sind,” the chiasmic structure of “joyous life,” “weckte zu *fröhlichem Leben* ... an der Sonne ihres *Lebens* sich zu *freuen*,” and the movement of these created creatures—and the movement of the sentence itself—into metaphor, into “the sun of their lives.” Notice too how the sentence ends as it began, with a gesture, a movement, of sunny self-reflection (“hob sich die Sonne,” “an der Sonne ihres Lebens sich zu freuen”). In a programmatic series of slow, circular, self-reflexive *poietic* gestures, then, the sentence narrates the movement of nature into metaphor, the birth of metaphor as natural.

<sup>17</sup>See Jacques Derrida, “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1982, 207–71.

<sup>18</sup>For a brilliant reading of Stifter’s “Vorrede” to *Bunte Steine* that makes a cognate argument (to which my observation here is indebted), see Eric Downing, *Double Exposures: Repetition and Realism in Nineteenth-Century German Fiction*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000, 25.

The second sentence too continues in the same vein, intensifying the text's metaphorical investment as it slowly begins to disrupt its bright, sunny Enlightenment setting, a progression subtly initiated on the linguistic level by the introduction of the unsettling prefix *ver-* into this seemingly stable natural environment:

Aus vergoldetem Waldessaume schmetterte die Amsel ihr Morgenlied, zwischen funkelnden Blumen in perlendem Grase tönnte der sehnsüchtigen Wachtel eintönend Minnelied, über dunkeln Tannen tanzten brünstige Krähen ihren Hochzeitreigen oder krächzten zärtliche Wiegenlieder über die dornichten Bettchen ihrer ungefederten Jungen. (3, emphasis mine)

With the striking image of a “gilded”—if tarnished—forest edge, the narrative introduces economic metaphors into nature (*vergoldet, funkelnd, perlend*) and into the “seams” of nature (*Waldessaume*)—a description that draws attention to the textual status of nature: to textual economies in nature and to textual economies in the narrative itself. Again the narrative emphasizes its own constructedness in a series of self-reflexive gestures. In the fluid movement from the opening *Morgenlied* to the central *Minnelied* to the closing image of the *Wiegenlied*, the sentence forms both a structural and a conceptual totality as it circles around sound, around song. As it progresses from nature (*morning song*) through culture (the love song of the *Minnelied*) to self-generation (the tender cradle lullaby), the sentence again narrates a story of birth, of creation, of natural *poiesis*, we might say; the circular structure of this creative gesture is reflected in the image of the crows' *Hochzeitreigen*, their wedding rondelés. The central motif of the song, the *lied*, is itself translated into sound in a mellifluous, monotonous acoustic image that resonates self-reflexively at the midpoint, the core of the sentence: *tönnte... eintönend; Tannen... tanzten*. Yet the soothing beauty of this chiasmic *Tonbild* is immediately shattered by the repetition of harsh, rhyming *kr-* sounds (*Krähen, krächzten*) as “darkness” (*über dunkeln Tannen*) and “thorniness” (*die dornichten Bettchen*) are introduced into the bright, sun-lit nature, a foreshadowing of the danger lurking at the center of this gilded Enlightenment nature.

The overt constructedness of the nature depicted in the two sentences that comprise the first paragraph, the self-reflexive circularity that masks a darkness behind its sunny optimism, is then picked up on in the second paragraph, likewise comprised of two long, run-on sentences or *Schachtelsätze*, as the narrative—resonating with its opening progression of birdsong from *Morgenlied* through *Minnelied* to *Wiegenlied*—moves from sun-lit nature through human culture to family honor, self-generation, and inherited original sin. Like Russian nesting



dolls, or an orb spider's web, the narrative reflects itself, circling in on itself, enveloping itself in a deliberate gesture of containment as it emphasizes its own core constructedness:

In der *Mitte* der sonnenreichen Halde hatte die Natur einen fruchtbaren beschirmten Boden eingegraben; *mittendrin* stand stattlich und blank ein schönes Haus, *eingefaßt* von einem prächtigen Baumgarten, in welchem noch einige Hochäpfelbäume prangten in *ihrem späten Blumenkleide* [...]. (3, emphasis mine)

Again and again the sentence circles around itself, slowly and self-reflexively honing in on its subject, its center, its core: in the *middle* of the sun-rich mountain slope, nature has dug into itself, creating a fertile, sheltered earth, a dell; in the *midst* of this fertile—hence generative—sheltered earth, the ground of nature, nature's ground, in the philosophical sense, stands a stately, shining, beautiful house, *surrounded, embraced* by a splendid orchard; even the apple trees are encompassed, still arrayed resplendently, in their late floral dresses in this contained, sheltered, natural Eden-like setting. As the very obviously controlled and controlling language describing the arboreal raiment suggests, these are the flowers of rhetoric that clothe—indeed, create—the sparkling brightness of this idyllic image, and like the late spring blossoms adorning the metaphorically-laden apple trees, it is an image destined to Fall:

Um das Haus lag *ein sonntäglicher Glanz*, den man mit einigen Besenstrichen, angebracht Samstag abends zwischen Tag und Nacht, nicht zu erzeugen vermag, der ein Zeugnis ist des köstlichen Erbgutes angestammter Reinlichkeit, die alle Tage gepflegt werden muß, der Familienehre gleich, welcher eine einzige unbewachte Stunde Flecken bringen kann, die Blutflecken gleich unauslöslich bleiben von Geschlecht zu Geschlecht, jeder Tünche spottend. (3, emphasis mine)

At the center of the series of the concentric circles patiently, ploddingly, constructed by the narrative stands the house, the *oikos*, the site of domestic order, of domestic economy, enveloped in gleaming purity, in natural purity. Notice how the sunny day of the text's opening sentence is reinscribed metaphorically in the form of a Sunday glow, a sunny-day glow: again the narrative asserts the naturalness of its own construction. Essential to this circular, iterative *poiesis* is a purity that cannot be generated (*erzeugt*) hastily, artificially, with the sweep of a broom, but that must be carefully cultivated, lest the blood stains of inherited sin tarnish its gleaming surface. Yet with its assertions to the contrary, the narrative draws attention to its own careful whitewashing,

its own mocking, maculate nature here. The bright, gleaming stately house, surrounded by nature, protected by nature, hugged by nature, masks its true core, its essential nature, its foundational curse: this is the spider house, the economic ordering structure whose sunny-day *Glanz* conceals a black spider's *Glottz*.<sup>19</sup>

## II

The text's second frame opens on Ascension Day with a descent, an ironic arachnid movement from on high, from the serenely majestic yet thorny natural environment through a richly textured nature to the friendly but narrow valley in which the homiletic storyline unfolds. As it descends, the narrative asserts a stability of signification in the natural order of things, twice declaring the purity—indeed, the originary natural purity—of the sheen, the *Glanz*, of divine and human construction, and of its own self-reflexive *poiesis*: “Nicht umsonst glänzte die durch Gottes Hand *erbaute* Erde und das von Menschenhänden *erbaute* Haus *im reinsten Schmucke*, über beide *erglänzte* heute *ein Stern* am blauen Himmel, ein hoher Feiertag” (4, emphasis mine). Patiently reflecting the metaphoric investment of the text's opening paragraphs, the second frame too gleams in the purity of its natural jeweled adornment, bathing its divinely created setting in a solar, now astral, heavenly natural glow, the chiasmic *Tonbild* of birdsong now transformed into a wondrous, resonant circle of sound: “Wunderbar klang es über die Hügel her, man wußte nicht, woher das Klingen kam, es tönte wie von allen Seiten; es kam von den Kirchen her, draußen in den weiten Tälern [...]” (4). Echoing the ringing of nature, and the ringing of church bells, the narrative too resonates self-reflexively here, creating a natural *religio*, an anaphoric binding together of image and sound, as it conjoins Ascension with an emblematic figure of the blooming plant world that grows toward heaven, an annually recurring, and hence cyclical, symbol or *Sinnbild*—an aesthetic *Sinn-bild*—of humanity's self-determination:

Es war der Tag, an welchem der Sohn wieder zum Vater gegangen war [...].

Es war der Tag, an welchem die ganze Pflanzenwelt dem Himmel entgegenwächst und blüht in voller Üppigkeit, dem Menschen ein alle Jahre neu werdendes Sinnbild seiner eigenen Bestimmung. (4)

<sup>19</sup>This dialectical play between *Glanz* and *Glottz* runs throughout the text. Theodor Salfinger, *Gotthelf und die Romantik*, Basel: Schwabe, 1945, draws attention to the recurrences of *Glanz* in the narrative (150–1).

This then is the text's conceit: a circular, serial, self-reflexive assertion of stability in nature and in the nature of things, and in the process of signification itself.

Precisely this stability is asserted in the ensuing narrative, in the continuation of the novel's second frame. In sedate, leisurely, mind-numbing detail—monotonously punctuated by a series of *langsams*, reinforced by numerous repetitions of *lange*, *wieder* and *endlich* for good measure<sup>20</sup>—the narrator slowly (and perforce ironically) describes the bustling life around the beautiful house as preparations are made for the baptism. Near the fountain horses are being curried with special care, magnificent mares surrounded by frolicking foals, while cows watching contently slake their thirst in the well's wide trough, and twice the boy has to bring broom and shovel because he has not cleared away the traces of their contentment cleanly enough.<sup>21</sup> Scatological humor aside, the besmirching image is striking in this cleansing, baptismal environment: the cow flop residue clearly resonates with the indelible blood spots of the text's outer frame. The necessarily insufficient, incomplete effacement of traces of dirt, of dung, the sheer impossibility of washing away or whitewashing the stain of inherited sin, of original sin, encapsulates the text's religious and aesthetic agendas: it is no accident that the spider's destabilizing story, explicitly linked to the origins of mankind (27), to Eden, is likewise inherited from father to son (118). Despite its assertions of pureness, *Reinlichkeit*, the narrative has already marked itself with the indelible traces of its own instability.

Reflecting back on itself yet again, the text continues with a repetition of this self-cleansing, stabilizing gesture, a purifying gesture that is bound to fail, cursed to fail. At the fountain sturdy maidens—who humorously, if obliquely, reflect the contented cows at the trough—vigorously scrub their ruddy faces with handy rags of rough-hewn linen, their hair twisted together in two circular knots over their ears. With hasty industriousness they carry water through the open door, while a dark pillar of smoke “lifts itself” in mighty bursts from a short chimney straight and tall into the blue air<sup>22</sup>—a dark, and phallic,

<sup>20</sup>See in particular pp. 5–25, which contain numerous “slow” examples.

<sup>21</sup>“Ein reges Leben bewegte sich um das schöne Haus. In des Brunnens Nähe wurden mit besonderer Sorgfalt Pferde gestriegelt, stattliche Mütter, umgaukelt von lustigen Füllen; im breiten Brunnentroge stillten behaglich blickende Kühe ihren Durst, und zweimal mußte der Bube Besen und Schaufel nehmen, weil er die Spuren ihrer Behaglichkeit nicht sauber genug weggeräumt” (4).

<sup>22</sup>“Herzhaft wuschen am Brunnen mit einem handlichen Zwilchfetzen stämmige Mägdle ihre rotbräunten Gesichter, die Haare in zwei Knäuel über den Ohren zusammengedreht, trugen mit eifertiger Emsigkeit Wasser durch die geöffnete Türe, und in mächtigen Stößen hob sich gerade und hoch in die blaue Luft empor aus kurzem Schornsteine die dunkle Rauchsäule” (4–5).

image of pollution, of the staining of original sin, that resonates with and at the same time destabilizes the narrative's emblematic aesthetic *Sinnbild*, the plant world growing toward heaven as a natural symbol of humanity's self-determination (4).

The second narrative frame proceeds at great length in the same exceptionally slow, self-reflexive, plodding manner, and this is precisely the point: to assert control, to impose stability on signification, and on the very process of narration itself. Page upon page of painstaking detail—replete with circular imagery—eventually coalesces around a christening, a double act of signification: a naming of the child and a naming of the child as Christian.

Here too the instability of the process of signification is again underscored. Recounting the stormy weather of his own christening that was said to presage either a horrific death or great glory in war and had in fact resulted in neither (14), the grandfather—who will narrate the spider's tale with arachnid determination<sup>23</sup>—introduces an element of hermeneutic indeterminacy, of doubt, into the staid, realist imagery of the text. Similarly, a precarious moment of uncertainty—narrated at great length—humorously animates, and threatens to undermine, the present christening. To her great distress, the god-mother—explicitly likened to a young morning sun (12), the rising sun with which the narrative commences its signifying series (3)—is charged with announcing the child's name at the ceremony, but does not know it and fears the baby boy will receive a girl's name. But the pastor placidly provides the missing nomenclature, thereby erasing the danger of deviation from the proper signifying order. During the ensuing festivities the question of nomenclature is again raised—this time with respect to domestic order, to the *oikos*—as the talk turns to marriage and the male fear that these days rather than getting an honest, upright “house mother” for a wife, the husband will be stuck with a “house fool” or even a “house devil”: “man kriege statt einer braven Hausmutter nur einen Hausnarr oder gar einen Hausteufel” (23).

This seemingly innocuous lighthearted exchange—which likewise underscores the instability of signification in the narrative—serves to introduce the first of the narrative's interior storylines. Here too, circularity, slowness, and deferral inform the text. After lunch, the men make their “rounds” around the farmstead, and then the guests settle “around” a tree, the women carefully protecting their dresses, but exposing their red-trimmed petticoats to the “Andenken,” the

<sup>23</sup>The narrator describes an interruption in the grandfather's conversation with the following words reminiscent of a spider repairing its broken web: “Der aber hält, wie alte Leute meist gewohnt sind, seinen Gegenstand fest und knüpft unverdrossen den abgerissenen Faden immer neu wieder auf” (15).

memory, of the green grass (25)—an apparently innocuous, if risqué, detail that resonates with the besmirching images of the text's outer frames, and with the sexual stain that will be introduced in the first interior storyline: the mark of the green huntsman. Just as the outer layers of the women's finery may cover an underlying green stain, so too does the stately whitewashed house bear witness to a hidden "green" curse. An ugly, dark wooden window post in the grandfather's house in fact contains a "house devil," the titular black spider who has been imprisoned in the family homestead for hundreds of years—a clear embodiment of *das Unheimliche*, the un-homely, the uncanny. Following protracted reservations, and an additional attempt at deferral, the grandfather is admonished to stop with the "Schnecken tänze" and to reveal the truth, "die Wahrheit" (26), "einen aufrichtigen Bericht," an honest account, "das Wahre" (27). After even more "Schnecken tanz" (27), the grandfather recounts the spider's back story, but requests that the account not be spread, thereby establishing an analogy, if not an equivalence, between narrative and spider: as that which should be contained, but is not.<sup>24</sup>

### III

Here then very briefly is the story he tells.

A feudal overlord, a foreigner, Hans von Stoffeln, demands the impossible: after ordering his fiefs to build him a castle in an isolated, barren locale, he commands them, with a voice that resonates as if coming from a 100-year-old oak (32)—a voice that resonates programmatically with the natural *Tonbilder* of the text's outer frames—to plant 100 full-grown beech trees to line the entrance to his estate. The peasants, faced with the triple threats of starvation, whipping, and death, comply, yet their hapless attempts to transport the trees inexplicably fail. A "green huntsman," the Devil, then appears and offers his assistance. (In folklore the Devil traditionally appears as a green huntsman; the repeated associations here of "der Grüne" with both stormy weather and the river Grüne [77] also suggests that there is something inherently natural, if dangerously antithetical, about this particular incarnation of the fiery green-clad huntsman, who likewise speaks with a sharply resounding voice [36].) The men are strikingly

<sup>24</sup>See Donahue: "At the level of discourse, it is crucial to see the frame as part and parcel of the patriarchal parable. It is the structural analog to the *Bystal* which safely encases the spider woman" ("The Kiss of the Spider Woman: Gotthelf's 'Matricentric' Pedagogy and Its (Post)war Reception," 313).

ineffectual in the face of this grave dilemma; but the virago Christine, a foreign woman living in their midst, true to name acts as a kind of savior figure: she makes a pact with the green huntsman, who demands an unbaptized child in exchange for his services. Christine agrees to the deal audaciously, thinking that she can outwit the Devil using delay tactics, a false oath, a *Ver-sprechen*: no child will be born before the beech trees are planted, and once the trees are planted, the peasants can laugh away the green man by reading a few masses (44). (It is worth noting parenthetically that Christine's reasoning is grounded in folkloric precedent. In many tales, including the legend of Paracelsus, the Devil performs a salutary function and then is outwitted or tricked, imprisoned, for example, in a fir tree: the threat of damnation contained.)

But here the binding power of the oath pertains. And, in a significant deviation from folkloric precedent, the oath is pledged in an *extra-linguistic* register. The pact is sealed not with a sanguine signature, as Christine fears, but with a boldly sexual diabolical kiss. In a strange, chiasmic, Medusean reversal of gender roles, the green huntsman shapes his (arguably vaginal) mouth into a "point," touches Christine's cheek with his pointy mouth, and infuses the phallic virago—who stands there "steif und starr"—with a "pointed" iron of fire that penetrates her body and her soul:

Somit *spitzte* er seinen Mund gegen Christines Gesicht, und Christine konnte nicht fliehen, war wiederum wie gebannt, steif und starr. Da berührte der *spitzige* Mund Christines Gesicht, und ihr war, als ob von *spitzigem* Eisen aus Feuer durch Mark und Bein fahre, durch Leib und Seele [...]. (45, emphasis mine)<sup>25</sup>

With this fiery, pointy, pointed kiss, the huntsman marks Christine, brands her with his natural essence, a "burning" or "Glut" (60) that is as yet invisible, but that takes on the tinge of a metaphorical vegetative "greenness" here. The huntsman disappears and Christine is left standing as if petrified and oddly plant-like in nature: "Verschwunden war der Grüne, und Christine stund wie versteinert, als ob tief in den Boden hinunter ihre Füße Wurzeln getrieben hätten in jenem schrecklichen Augenblick" (45), a Daphne-esque transformation that resonates with, and reverses, the text's emblematic aesthetic *Sinnbild*, the plant world growing up toward heaven as a symbol of humanity's self-determination (4).

<sup>25</sup>Grimm lists among the many meanings of the word "Spitz": "membrum virile, das männliche Glied." Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, vol. XVI. Leipzig: Hirzel, 1936, 2571.

The “planted” Christine then experiences a new, and profoundly natural, fluid aesthetic. No longer cognizant of her own thoughts, she perceives a “thundering” in her spirit (45), as if a mighty water were pouring its floods over towering cliffs into a deep, dark abyss: “Endlich war sie ihrer Glieder wieder mächtig, aber im Gemüte brauste und sauste es ihr, als ob ein mächtiges Wasser seine Fluten wälze über turmhohen Felsen hinunter in schwarzen Schlund” (45). (This potent and dynamically fluid sublime image will be reinforced later in the text, with the signifying confluence of the green huntsman, *der Grüne*, with the swollen and overflowing river Grüne [77]). That night nature seems to celebrate the “marriage” of Christine and the green huntsman with a wild, whirling, cataclysmic storm that results in death and fundamental upheaval (46).<sup>26</sup>

Precisely because it is taken *outside* language, the “wedding” oath opens up a new, terrifyingly fluid, dynamically sublime discursive order. Following the sexual encounter that seals the pact, Christine develops first an invisible, then visible black spot, a “Malzeichen” (62) on her cheek where the huntsman had kissed her—an unstable, mutating signifier that marks the moment of transgression, of hubristic arrogance (and of course functions as both a mark of Cain and a marker for original sin, inherited—as the narrative has stressed from the opening paragraphs—from generation to generation). In light of the gloss on the transgenerational *Erbsünde*, it is unsurprising that this unstable diabolical signifier too proves to be serial in nature. The black mark develops streaks, then hairy legs, and eventually transforms into a black orb spider, a venomous *Kreuzspinne* (61) who emerges from Christine’s cheek and gives birth to a multiplicity of spiders likened to the Black Plague who kill livestock and peasants alike. After reneging on her deal with the Devil three times Christine, “gezeichnet” (68), herself undergoes a menacing—and profoundly fluid—metamorphosis. Hit with holy water, she sizzles and shrinks into the black spider on her cheek and becomes one with it. Hit again with more holy water, she swells up, sizzling yet again, bigger and bigger, and turns into a large, black, glaring, poisonous spider (78–79)—an *Ungeziefer* (79), an *Untier* (89, 97, 107)—who likewise wreaks havoc on kith, kin, and kine, plunging the region into chaos.

<sup>26</sup>“Es war eine wilde Nacht. Im Lüften und Klüften heulte und toste es, als ob die Geister der Nacht Hochzeit hielten in den schwarzen Wolken, die Winde die wilden Reigen spielten zu ihrem grausamen Tanze, die Blitze die Hochzeitfackeln wären und der Donner der Hochzeitsegen” (46).

Strikingly, it is not death per se, but fear—rooted in a breakdown in the very process of signification, of nomenclature—that is the true source of abject terror here. Appearing “bald nirgends, bald hier, bald dort” (83), “nirgends und allenthalben” (84), “allenthalben und nirgends” (84), the “cross” spider Christine weaves a fluid web of uncertainty in and around the community, leaving the populace quaking “in unsäglicher Angst” (83), creating a nameless fear, a “namenlose Angst” that is far worse than the horrific death she inflicts on her victims: “Es war ein Sterbet, wie man noch von keinem wußte, und das Sterben daran war schrecklicher, als man es je erfahren, und schrecklicher noch als das Sterben war die namenlose Angst vor der Spinne, die allenthalben war und nirgends, die, wenn man am sichersten sich wähnte, einem todbringend plötzlich in die Augen glotzte” (84). This extra-linguistic reign of terror continues until a pious mother captures the false Christ figure Christine with a true Christ-like gesture of self-sacrifice: dying a martyr’s death, she contains the *Untier* in a wooden beam, thereby restoring the proper Christian signifying order.

#### IV

At this point the first interior storyline ends. In the second narrative frame the grandmother cautions that the remainder of the story should not be told. But the grandfather, who insists on establishing the truth, the precise truth,<sup>27</sup> continues his account, again underscoring the connection between narration and spider: as that which should be contained but is not.

The second interior storyline describes a time of prosperity and its attendant arrogance, a period of stability increasingly undermined by a dangerously fluid arachnid signifying order: the spider woman Christine will appear as multiplicity in this portion of the text.<sup>28</sup> For generations, the grandfather recounts, the spider house was regarded with reverence, almost like a church (97), and the people remembered with gratitude “die Mutter, die für alle gestorben” (97). One day both nobility and peasants alike decide to destroy the spider house

<sup>27</sup> “[E]s ist besser, die Leute vernehmen punktum die Wahrheit, als daß sie selbst etwas ersinnen; die Wahrheit bringt unserem Hause keine Unehre” (94).

<sup>28</sup> See Benno von Wiese, “Die schwarze Spinne,” in *Die deutsche Novelle von Goethe bis Kafka: Interpretationen*, Düsseldorf: Bagel, 1956, 176–95: “Zu dem Geisterhaften der Spinne gehört ihre Pluralität. Sie ist die *eine* Spinne und erscheint doch in der Vielheit” (186).



to rid the community of the spider. The grandmother will not allow this, insisting that Christian faith alone will keep the spider safe in its hole. Devoutness is then fostered piously, and God's blessing lies over the entire valley (98) until "fremde Weiber" begin to degrade the region's stalwart religiosity with "Hochmut und Hoffart" (99). Pride and greed soon hold sway: a sly, domineering woman who resembles the spider woman Christine in many respects (100), takes control of the family living in the spider house. She marries off her good son Christen to another domineering woman, and the two *Meisterweiber* build a new house and fail to attend to the wooden beam in the old family homestead: almost 200 years have passed, and the imprisoned spider has become aestheticized, a folktale, a saga (101), a serial story, passed on from generation to generation.

But this arachnid fiction of course proves to be terrifyingly real. On Christmas Eve a strange man—the Devil in disguise—releases the black, glaring spider, who emerges from her wooden hole swollen with centuries of accumulated venom. She again wreaks havoc, decimating the population. Cursed by the community for the sins of his mother and wife (111)—the standard bearer, then, of original sin—the very pious Christen, true to name, understands that he must sacrifice himself, as his ancestress had done before him (111). A wild woman resembling Christine "in ursprünglicher Gestalt" then gives birth and indicates to Christen that he must be the messenger, "der Bote," lest he be cursed for eternity (113). (Notice that this incarnation of Christine, true to name, again performs a salutary function here. The *Kreuzspinne*, a figure of chiasm and multiplicity, is both bane and blessing: precisely this instability is at stake in the text.) Increasingly it seems to Christen that he sees the spider in the wild woman's eyes, sees the spider emerging from her distorted features, sees that she is the spider herself (113). With God's help and fervent prayer he then restores a proper Christian signifying order: after ensuring that the newborn child will be baptized, he kills the wild woman, grabs the monstrous arachnid *Untier*, and with his dying breath again imprisons the spider in her wooden post.

There she and her story sit, contained and kept very secret—"sehr heimlich" (118, emphasis mine)—until now. The grandfather hence lets out the house secret in the form of a contained narrative, a containment again imposed, articulated in religious and natural registers, in the text's outer frame. The grandfather ends his narrative, and a hush falls over the audience, while the stately spider house gleams in the moonlight, "rein und schön" (121). Reflecting its own storyline,

the text then baptizes itself in the proper Christian order. The text closes with the assertion that those who have in their bosoms—their metaphorical hearts—a fear of God and a good conscience will never be awakened by the black spider, but only by the friendly sun (121). The end of the narrative hence circles back to its sunny beginning,<sup>29</sup> containing both itself and its spider in a tightly woven homiletic web of natural Enlightenment optimism and stability, a stability that will endure under the control of a staid signifying system, until “der Sinn ändert” (121). Yet as suggested by the audience’s hearts, again unnamed but beating *unheimlich* under their “Brusttücher” (121), and by the inaudible throbbing that emanates *unheimlich* from the dark wooden beam at the heart of the family home (103), there is a terrifyingly real tell-tale heart to this story.<sup>30</sup> Like the black spider who is nowhere and everywhere (84) and perches unnoticed on its next victim’s head (86, 87): Gotthelf’s narrative stages the production of poetic realism as a serial web of controlled and controlling discursive practices that at heart are predicated on a throbbing darkly natural *Unheimlichkeit*, on instability, deception, and death.

*Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey*

<sup>29</sup>Donahue observes that the text begins with Ascension Day and “very nearly” concludes with Christmas, likewise suggesting a cyclical structure to the narrative (“The Kiss of the Spider Woman: Gotthelf’s ‘Matricentric’ Pedagogy and Its (Post) war Reception,” 311).

<sup>30</sup>Poe’s story, originally published in January 1843, is contemporaneous with *Die schwarze Spinne*.