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What are the various atmospheres or moods that the reading of literary works can trigger? Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has long argued that the function of literature is not so much to describe, or to re-present, but to make present. Here, he goes one step further, exploring the substance and reality of language as a material component of the world—impalpable hints, tones, and airs that, as much as they may be elusive, are no less matters of actual fact. The German word *Stimmung* is crucial to his project. It designates an inner feeling so private that it cannot be circumscribed and something objective that surrounds people and exercises a physical influence; it also evokes voice and the tuning of instruments. Through an analysis of a wide range of texts from medieval to modern times, this book investigates the meanings that *Stimmung* calls to mind.

Conveying personal encounters with poetry, song, painting, and the novel, this book thus gestures toward the intangible and in the process, constitutes a bold defense of the subjective experience of the arts.

HANS ULRICH GUMBRECHT is Albert Guérard Professor in Literature at Stanford University. His books in English include *In 1926* (1998), *Production of Presence* (Stanford, 2004), and *In Praise of Athletic Beauty* (2006).

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Gumbrecht

ATMOSPHERE, MOOD, STIMMUNG

ON A HIDDEN POTENTIAL OF LITERATURE

STANFORD



# HANS ULRICH GUMBRECHT ATMOSPHERE, MOOD, STIMMUNG

ON A HIDDEN POTENTIAL OF LITERATURE

TRANSLATED BY ERIK BUTLER

ATMOSPHERE,  
MOOD,  
STIMMUNG

*On a Hidden Potential  
of Literature*

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht

*Translated by Erik Butler*

Stanford University Press  
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ATMOSPHERE,  
MOOD,  
STIMMUNG

## READING FOR STIMMUNG

*How to Think About the  
Reality of Literature Today*

1

Over the last ten years, a mood of uncertainty has befallen academic engagements with literature—or “literary science,” as it is called in German. In quick succession and with varying levels of intellectual productivity, a series of theoretical paradigms dominated literary studies in the second half of the twentieth century. New Criticism yielded to Structuralism, and Structuralism to Marxism. Marxism and Structuralism gave way to Deconstruction and New Historicism. Deconstruction and New Historicism were then replaced by Cultural Studies and Identity Studies. An almost rhythmic change of the basic assumptions about literary interpretation became the norm. Since the beginning of the early nineties, however, no new theory of literature has posed a real intellectual or institutional challenge. This does not mean that there has been a lack of interesting publications, too few thinkers who command respect, or a dearth of debates. On the contrary: now that the constant pressure to revise one’s epistemology has relaxed, many scholars have found more time than ever—and also more inspiration—to concentrate on the literatures of different epochs and examine the

complex historical realities that gave them their full resonance. It is no accident that we have witnessed a return to the most canonized and classical literary works. Now, without sacrificing academic honor, one can finally admit to reading them for their own sake.

Space has been freed for new inquiry. This is all the more remarkable for having long belonged to figures who were so imposing that most of their contemporaries had to declare themselves either adherents or opponents of their ideas. The fact that such illustrious personages are no longer to be found is both a symptom of, and a reason for, the change that has taken place. Literary studies cannot possibly remain the same after the loss of scholars with the distinction and intellectual vitality of Erich Auerbach, Kenneth Burke, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Lucien Goldmann, Wolfgang Iser, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Wolfgang Iser, Richard Rorty, Edward Said, and Raymond Williams.

Today, after manifold departures, reorganizations, and metamorphoses (which, as a rule, have not been motivated by any explicit program or project), we find ourselves facing marked—indeed, seemingly irreconcilable, mutually exclusive—differences between two basic assumptions concerning the ontology of literature. (Needless to say, the actual intellectual landscape is more complicated, but I believe its structure begins with one basic divide.) By “ontology of literature,” I mean fundamental stances about how literary texts—as material facts and worlds of meaning—relate to realities outside of works themselves.

On the one hand stands Deconstruction. Despite insistent claims of innovation, Deconstruction has always belonged to the “linguistic turn” of philosophy. This has meant—and, for its adherents, it continues to mean—that contact between language and reality outside of language cannot occur; at any rate, suggestions to the contrary are viewed as naïve and dismissed with contempt. More than any other, Derrida’s friend de Man posited—as if it were a matter of fact—that all functions of literature and modes of encountering texts, as “allegories

of reading,” demonstrate how language does not refer to the world at all, ever.

On the other hand, there is Cultural Studies. Cultural Studies shares, at least in part, the methodological (it might be better to say: ideological) assumptions of Marxism, which it considers its precursor and point of departure. As opposed to Deconstruction, Cultural Studies—as it emerged in Great Britain and was transformed into *Kulturwissenschaften* in Germany (without much change)—has never been skeptical about literature’s connection with extra-linguistic realities. If anything, researchers in this field have so thoroughly fused their trust in the validity of quantitative and empirical research with a certain carefree attitude toward epistemology that the modest philosophical results of this convergence make Deconstruction and its rejection of reference seem almost appealing, at least in philosophical terms.

I believe that literary studies, as a site where intellectual forces combine, risks stagnation for as long as it remains stuck between these two positions, whose contrasts and tensions can cancel each other out. To overcome such dangers—which have already materialized in part—we need “third positions.” The German word *Stimmung* (which is very difficult to translate) gives form to the “third position” I would like to advocate. In analogy to the notion of “reading for the plot” that Peter Brooks set forth some years ago, I would like to propose that interpreters and historians of literature read with *Stimmung* in mind. I recommend this approach not least of all because this is the orientation of a great number of non-professional readers (who are not—and, of course, need not be—aware of the fact).

## 2

To gain awareness and appreciation of the different significations and shades of meaning that *Stimmung* conjures up, it is useful to look at the various clusters of words that translate the term into other languages. English offers “mood” and “climate.” “Mood” stands for an inner feeling

so private it cannot be precisely circumscribed. "Climate," on the other hand, refers to something objective that surrounds people and exercises a physical influence. Only in German does the word connect with *Stimme* and *stimmen*. The first means "voice," and the second "to tune an instrument"; by extension, *stimmen* also means "to be correct." As the tuning of an instrument suggests, specific moods and atmospheres are experienced on a continuum, like musical scales. They present themselves to us as nuances that challenge our powers of discernment and description, as well as the potential of language to capture them.

I am most interested in the component of meaning that connects *Stimmung* with music and the hearing of sounds. As is well known, we do not hear with our inner and outer ear alone. Hearing is a complex form of behavior that involves the entire body. Skin and haptic modalities of perception play an important role. Every tone we perceive is, of course, a form of physical reality (if an invisible one) that "happens" to our body and, at the same time, "surrounds" it. Another dimension of reality that happens to our bodies in a similar way and surrounds them is the weather. For this very reason, references to music and weather often occur when literary texts make moods and atmospheres present or begin to reflect upon them. Being affected by sound or weather, while among the easiest and least obtrusive forms of experience, is, physically, a concrete encounter (in the literal sense of *en-countering*: meeting up) with our physical environment.

Toni Morrison once described the phenomenon with the apt paradox of "being touched as if from inside." She was interested, I imagine, in an experience familiar to everyone: that atmospheres and moods, as the slightest of encounters between our bodies and material surroundings, also affect our psyche; however, we are unable to explain the causality (or, in everyday life, control its workings). One cannot claim to understand this dynamic, much less account for it fully. However, this circumstance is no reason not to draw attention to it and describe its many variants.

3

It might appear, at first glance, as if music and weather merely provided metaphors for what we call the "tone," "atmosphere," or, indeed, the *Stimmung* of a text. My point, however, is the fact that such tones, atmospheres, and *Stimmungen* never exist wholly independent of the material components of works—above all, their prosody. Therefore, texts affect the "inner feelings" of readers in the way that weather and music do. This is the reason I believe that the dimension of *Stimmung* discloses a new perspective on—and possibility for—the "ontology of literature." For in the opposition between Deconstruction and Cultural Studies, which I have mentioned, both sides make claims about the ontology of texts in terms of the paradigm of "representation." Texts are supposed to "represent" extra-linguistic reality (or, alternately, they are supposed to "want" to do so, even though this is impossible). The main difference between Deconstruction and Cultural Studies concerns the rejection—or affirmation—of texts' capacity to connect with something else. In contrast, an ontology of literature that relies on concepts derived from the sphere of *Stimmung* does not place the paradigm of representation front-and-center. "Reading for *Stimmung*" always means paying attention to the textual dimension of the forms that envelop us and our bodies as a physical reality—something that can catalyze inner feelings without matters of representation necessarily being involved. Otherwise, it would be unthinkable for the recitation of a lyrical text or the delivery of a prose work with a pronounced rhythmical component to reach and affect even readers who do not understand the language in question. Indeed, a special affinity exists between performance and *Stimmung*.

Without exception, all elements comprising texts can contribute to the production of atmospheres and moods, and this means that works rich in *Stimmung* need not be primarily—and certainly not exclusively—descriptive in nature. To be sure, a relationship exists between cer-

tain forms of narration and particular atmospheres (for instance, the convergence between an elegiac mood and the structure of Machado de Assis's *Memorial de Aires*, which one of the chapters discusses). The canon of world literature offers many examples of narrative prose we may associate, without hesitation, with *Stimmung*. Consider Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*. I cannot imagine a reader familiar with this text who was at all surprised that Aschenbach and Tadzio never become a couple, or that Aschenbach's existence—at the latest, from the time he reaches Venice—is a being-unto-death. Rather, it is the evocation of a certain fin-de-siècle decadence in all its complexity—all the nuances, smells, colors, sounds, and, above all, dramatic changes of weather—that has made this work so celebrated. In other words (and stated more philosophically—at least from the perspective of Nietzsche and Heidegger): the fascinating thing about Mann's work is a particular atmosphere that can only be experienced in a historically specific awareness of the presence of death in life.

4

On a side note, some good friends have remarked that it is fitting to indicate the associative connection between my advocacy of *Stimmung* and the larger, more or less philosophical, aim of making effects of “presence” the object of humanistic inquiry. In the relationship we entertain with things-in-the-world (and this is a consequence of the process of modernization), we consider interpretation—the ascription of meaning—to be of paramount importance. In addition, I would like to emphasize that things always already—and simultaneously with our unreflective habitus of positing significations they are supposed to hold—stand in a necessary relationship to our bodies. I call this relationship “presence.” We may touch objects, or not. They, in turn, may touch us (or not), and they may be experienced either as imposing or inconsequential. As described here, atmospheres and moods include the physical dimension of phenomena; unmistakably, their forms of

articulation belong to the sphere of aesthetic experience. They undoubtedly belong to the presence-related part of existence, and their articulations count as forms of aesthetic experience. (Of course, this does not mean that every articulation of presence that qualifies as “aesthetic” also counts as an atmosphere or mood.)

In conceptual terms, matters are more complicated. Against the historical backdrop of the advanced “process of Modernity,” one may consider “aesthetic experience” to consist of a tension-filled simultaneity of effects of meaning *and* effects of presence (as opposed to everyday experience, which registers only the former). It could be that we now devote more attention to atmospheres, moods, and the dimension of presence in general than fifty, two hundred, or five hundred years ago. Needless to say, this does not mean that it is any easier to bring about effects of presence (and, among them, atmospheres and moods). Instead, it might have something to do with an everyday mode of being-in-the-world that, for most of us, fuses consciousness and software—one that suspends the experience of presence, so to speak. Perhaps this state of withdrawal has provoked an enhanced need—and an increased desire—for encounters with presence.

5

In a brilliant contribution to the lexicon *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe*, David Wellbery recently—and for the first time—reconstructed the history of the concept of *Stimmung*, exploring its many historical and semantic layers. I would like to revisit key points of his article, above all because they illustrate how openness to atmospheres and moods can enhance our experience of literature, but also because his investigative methods encourage us to reflect on the specific form of historicity that distinguishes *Stimmung*. The first item Wellbery examines is Goethe's “Falconet” essay (published in 1776); this piece discusses the sensation of all-encompassing unity and harmony often experienced in altogether commonplace settings (here, a cobbler's shop). Artists, Goethe

observed, seek to give objective form—in a text, for instance—to the intangible things they encounter.

Soon after the essay's publication, *Stimmung* came to play a prominent role in the early discourse of philosophical aesthetics, which was coming into being at the time; this fact suggests that the homogeneity of situations and experiences had become an issue for contemporary society, which was rapidly undergoing internal differentiation. In *Critique of Judgment*—where the tuning of a musical instrument provides the metaphorical frame of reference—Kant affirmed that “balanced *Stimmung*” is the necessary condition for emotional and rational faculties of human understanding when they combine in judgments of taste. The intersection of feeling and reason also determined the meaning of the term for the philosophers of German Idealism (who often equated feeling and reason with subjectivity and objectivity). The notion is still influential today. In a similar spirit, the twentieth letter of Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Mankind* reads:

To pass from sensation to thought, the soul traverses a medium position, in which sensibility and reason act *simultaneously*. Sensibility and reason combine to suspend the power that determines them both; that is, their antagonism produces a negation. This medium situation—in which the soul is neither physically nor morally constrained, yet is active in two ways—merits being called a state of freedom.

Friedrich Hölderlin advanced a conception of *Stimmung* that differed from the views of his friends and contemporaries. For him, the word referred to sounds that were different from those of his own time and place, which he believed he had found in the world—and the works—of ancient Greece. Three-quarters of a century later, Nietzsche posited a connection that was similar in structure but much more speculative. For him, the word *Stimmung* named memories and intuitions from the early stages of humanity's existence. These ways of employing the concept of *Stimmung* produced a new meaning whose complexity

went far beyond the task of mediating between opposing positions (including radically contradictory ones) and forging unity and harmony. Now, *Stimmung* signified complete, unalienated existence—an unattainable state in the modern age. Drawing on such reflections, Alois Riegl was convinced that *Stimmung* would enjoy great fortunes in the twentieth century as a “nostalgia principle.” Two intellectual currents followed from this prediction. As a nostalgia principle with “futures” (i.e., “options”), *Stimmung* became the object of thought that may be considered to belong to the philosophy of history. At the same time, the connection between *Stimmung* and prehistoric stages of human evolution suggested mankind's future might elude the control of rationalism.

Taking, above all, the latter sense of this constellation as his point of departure (minus archaizing notions), Heidegger grants *Stimmung* a central role in his major work, *Being and Time* (1927). Here, *Stimmung* is described as part of the existential condition of “thrownness.” Varied—and constantly changing—moods and atmospheres, Heidegger writes, condition our behavior and feelings in everyday existence; we are not free to choose them. To be sure, this aspect of Heidegger's work—his understanding of the notion of *Stimmung*—was not widely received. Much more important for its reception in the twentieth century was a use of the concept that, in paradoxical fashion, confirmed Riegl's past prediction about the future. This confirmation was paradoxical because the charged meaning that Riegl had assigned *Stimmung* demonstrated, on the one hand, how his definition had become a point of reference in the philosophy of history; on the other, it gave rise to influential voices that denied its applicability to the present day.

Thus, Leo Spitzer—the Vienna-born master philologist of Romance languages—concluded “Classical and Christian Ideas of World Harmony” (published in two parts, 1944 and 1945, several years after the author had emigrated to the United States) with the assertion

that, in view of the World War that was now coming to an end, "harmony" had forever lost its place as a potential frame for cosmology and human existence. During the final months of the conflict, the German poet and military doctor Gottfried Benn likewise noted—almost with a hint of scorn—that *Stimmung*, understood as mediation between opposites, was now over. He went on to write—and it is not clear whether this apparent contradiction was intentional, or if it escaped his notice—that the *Stimmung* of his day was characterized by the coldness and sobriety of "existentialism." At this point, a turn occurred in the history of the concept; from now on, *Stimmung*—or, more precisely: one of the semantic variations of the word—was no longer charged with performing the role of "mediation" and "harmony."

## 6

Ever since *Stimmung* has ceased to imply any form of reconciliation or harmony at all—an inflexion wholly incompatible with its original meaning—ever since, that is, the absence of *Stimmung* in the classical sense has counted as a form of *Stimmung*, the concept has become available for universal application. There is now no situation without its "own" atmosphere and mood, which means that one can seek the characteristic *Stimmung* of every situation, work, and text. For this reason, the book at hand is not limited to historical contexts in which the desire for mediation and harmony takes center stage. On the contrary, *Stimmung* is explored as a universal category. There is no culture and no epoch that will not admit the universal question about specific atmospheres and moods.

Questions of a philosophical-historical nature remain, however. What particular meanings and dimensions of *Stimmung* do different historical and cultural conditions activate, and why? A subsidiary question belongs in this framework: What periods in the Western tradition saw *Stimmung* (or its functional equivalents) as a matter to be

thematized explicitly? In the interest of brevity, three theses may serve as a response:

In the first place, it is significant that, in the early modern period, collections of literary narratives and poems were accompanied by indications concerning the space where they were to be enjoyed and the music that was to accompany them. Boccaccio's *Decameron* provides the most well known example, but the works of María de Zayas (to be discussed) offer another. Niklas Luhmann called such instructions "compact communication." By this, he meant that, as literature became increasingly autonomous and independent of specific contexts and sites of performance, authors specified frameworks of communication (and I would add: frameworks of atmosphere) for their recitation and reception. Perhaps an awareness of the importance of *Stimmung* developed from the experience of isolation that conditioned the emergence of modern forms of subjectivity. Romanticism is the second—perhaps the exemplary—epoch of atmosphere and mood. *Stimmungen*, expressing nostalgia or protest, stood opposed to the monotony of life in "bourgeois" society.

I see the third moment at which *Stimmung* achieved condensed and intensified form at the end of the nineteenth century, when historical painting and historicizing architecture became popular. This is also when Riegl declared that atmosphere and mood would thrive in the twentieth century as the uncritical appetite for nostalgia—a prediction that was later confirmed in paradoxical fashion. The late nineteenth century was a time whose complexity seemed to escape, more and more, traditional forms of literature and art; consequently, the desire for individual points of access to harmony became more pronounced. It is no accident that at precisely this moment, Wilhelm Dilthey proposed to base humanistic methods of interpretation on personal encounters with literary texts and the situations that had given rise to them.

Already in Dilthey's day—although this occurred even more mark-

edly in the 1920s and toward the middle of the twentieth century (with consequences that would change the semantic contours of the term forever, as we have seen)—protest was voiced against overvaluations of harmony in works of culture. Of course, from a universalized conception of *Stimmung*, we can say that such protests themselves belonged to a particular mood or cultural atmosphere. Critical reservations about analyzing this aspect of the phenomenon stemmed—and, inasmuch as they persist today, stem—from the belief that *Stimmung* is accessible only to rarefied, subjective experience. Objections along these lines may be made against this very book. In a drastic formulation, Hegel had long raised concerns about the lack of objectivity from which such an approach may be seen to suffer:

The chief tendency of . . . superficial philosophy is to base science not on the development of thought and the concept, but on immediate perception and contingent imagination; and likewise, to reduce the complex inner articulation of the ethical, . . . the architectonics of its rationality—which, through determinate distinctions between the various spheres of . . . life . . . and through the strict proportions in which every pillar, arch, and buttress is held together, produces the strength of the whole from the harmony of its parts—to reduce this refined structure to a mush of “heart, friendship, and enthusiasm.”

7

The thesis of this book—and the challenge it offers—is that concentrating on atmospheres and moods offers literary studies a possibility for reclaiming vitality and aesthetic immediacy that have, for the most part, gone missing. It can only prove effective, of course, if we bear in mind strong words like Hegel’s, which provide both warning and motivation. It is not a matter of seeking possibilities of existence that have long since vanished, into which we might sometimes wish to escape (this orientation would inevitably be suspected of cultivating the bad habits of illusion and compensation.) Instead, the objective is to

follow configurations of atmosphere and mood in order to encounter otherness in intense and intimate ways.

The point of departure and catalyst for the experience of historical and cultural alterity lies, *contra* Hegel’s polemic, in the most objective phenomenal field of literary texts: in their prosody and poetic form. Without knowing exactly why it was so or precisely what “feelings” were involved, we can be sure that dramatists, actors, and spectators in seventeenth-century Paris were obsessed with the grave, pathos-laden verse form they called the “alexandrine.” In a literal sense, it was part of the city’s material reality at that time. Instead of disclosing meaning or objects of reference, the tone of such verses is a text-immanent component of the city’s past. Whenever we recite monologues or dialogues as Corneille or Racine fashioned them, we call them forth to new life. The sounds and rhythms of the words strike our bodies as they struck the spectators of that time. Therein lies an encounter—an immediacy, and an objectivity of the past-made-present—which cannot be undermined by any skepticism.

Above all in this sense, but naturally not concentrating exclusively on prosody, the chapters of this book review cases of presence, immediacy, and objectivity—and with particular attention to contexts always already associated with atmosphere and mood. For example, I connect the surprisingly “nervous” tone (at least from today’s perspective) in songs composed around 1200 by a man who went by the name of Walther von der Vogelweide with the climate of political instability and religious uncertainty that must have surrounded him, in which he conducted his verbal battles. By way of the sixteenth-century picaresque novel, I believe, it is possible to experience an atmosphere of tension between everyday life and religious orthodoxy that must have been typical of Counter-Reformation Spain. Shakespeare’s sonnets open a world of erotic desire inseparable from specific material surroundings. Diderot’s *Neveu de Rameau*, through its title figure and his environment, confronts us with an almost overwhelming roughness of

attitude that may have been prevalent in the years before the French Revolution. *Memorial de Aires*—a fictional diary that Joaquim Machado de Assis, the great classic figure of Brazilian letters, wrote in the early twentieth century—conducts us into the melancholy and vague abandonment that must have pervaded late-imperial Rio de Janeiro. In a European context, Thomas Mann's celebrated *Death in Venice* makes the same period present; the work combines the protagonist's ineffable feelings and the city's weather—his material surroundings—in a fatal way.

In different dimensions and by means of different textual elements, these works make readers encounter past realities. One tends to overlook the effects of immediacy they create; indeed, it is almost a professional obligation for scholars and critics today to overlook them. This immediacy in the experience of past presents occurs without it being necessary to understand what the atmospheres and moods mean; we do not have to know what motivations and circumstances occasioned them. For what affects us in the act of reading involves the present of the past in substance—not a sign of the past or its representation.

## 8

A recent trend in literary studies is to read works—and especially canonical ones—as if they were meant to offer allegories of philosophical arguments or agendas (this, of course, is not the same as occasionally employing philosophical concepts or arguments when reading literature). Such an approach seeks, as it were, to free ideational content from the bothersome complexities of form. Even in the best of cases, this mode of interpretation is unable to answer the question why writers evidently decided to use complicated and complex literary forms to advance philosophical claims. Here, I find confirmation for my belief that a more important function of literary texts lies in the potential that their concreteness and historical immediacy hold. By “concreteness,” I mean that every atmosphere and every mood—as similar as

they may be to others—has the singular quality of a material phenomenon. One can gesture toward this singularity; however, *qua* singularity, it can never be defined absolutely by language or circumscribed by concepts.

Readings that concentrate on *Stimmung*—as opposed to efforts to find allegories of philosophical arguments (which, of course, should not be deemed altogether inadmissible)—insist on distance. This does not mean that the “presentification” of past atmospheres and moods cannot be pursued with philosophical aims in mind. At the beginning of the Second World War, for example, the great Romance philologist Karl Vossler—who had already written a number of essays in the 1920s that may be taken as meditations on *Stimmung*—published a book on the poetics of loneliness in seventeenth-century Spain. At least from today's perspective, his reading derived a mood—and perhaps a sense of hope, too—from the lyrical mysticism of Jewish Marranos. I suspect that Vossler understood this component of the texts he examined as a “consolation of philosophy,” which he meant to oppose to the threats and commandments of silence that were present in Germany at the time. The emphasis of historical immediacy in reading for *Stimmung* should not be equated with political naiveté. What distinguishes reading for *Stimmung* from other modes of literary interpretation, however—in many cases, at least—is a lack of distinction between aesthetic and historical experience. Vossler's reading of seventeenth-century Spanish works makes present a moment of the past. This past-made-present is encountered in its foreignness. Simultaneously with historical experience, then, the reading produces consolation and edification; and because they are qualitatively different from historical alterity, it is proper to deem these phenomena “aesthetic.”

What Vossler made an object of experience—on the basis of a limited number of works in a single genre—was the atmosphere of a historical moment, not the mood of an individual situation. In addition to making present the mood of particular texts, one should attempt to

capture the dominant moods of broader historical situations by examining works with different origins, forms, and contents. I have tried to do so in chapters on “Surrealism” in the early 1900s, on the absence of representations of happiness in the 1920s, and on the intellectual climate of “Deconstruction” at the end of the same century. In so doing, I encountered a curious continuity between different senses of the (supposed) impossibility of representing the world. In principle—one should emphasize again—there is no historical period, no phenomenological plane, no genre, and no medium that displays an exclusive affinity for *Stimmung*. Paintings, songs, conventions of design, and symphonies can all absorb atmospheres and moods and later offer them up for experience in a new present. For this reason, chapters of the book are devoted to the canvases of Caspar David Friedrich and to Janis Joplin’s song, “Me and Bobby McGee.”

Still, the question bears repeating: how, after moving beyond the objectivity of form, is it possible, when attempting to encounter atmosphere and mood, to avoid dissolving into what Hegel accused of being “the mush of the heart”? No definitive answer exists to this question, nor is there a sure way to guarantee immunity. Concentrating on formal phenomena permits one to avoid the worst, but it is equally important not to attribute absolute qualities—or make existential claims about putative superiority—when encountering atmospheres and moods from the past and other cultures. In addition to the experience of empathy, a measure of sobriety and verbal moderation should accompany the act of reading for *Stimmung*. In many cases, it is better to gesture toward potential moods instead of describing them in detail (much less celebrating them).

9

But how can we uncover atmospheres and moods, retrace them and understand them? Is there such a thing as a professional—or, for that matter, “scientific”—approach? For the very fact that every *Stimmung*

is historically and culturally unique, and because the same elements that constitute the phenomenon go missing when meaning is at issue—and certainly because our field of study has displayed so little interest in the matter—I am skeptical about the power of “theories” to explain atmospheres and moods, and I doubt the viability of “methods” to identify them. Indeed, my skepticism concerning methods is even stronger, for I believe that researchers on the terrain of the “human sciences” should rely more on the potential of counterintuitive thinking than on a pre-established “path” or “way” (the etymological meaning of *method*). Counterintuitive thinking is not afraid to deviate from the norms of rationality and logic that govern everyday life (and for good reason!). Instead, it is set into motion by “hunches.” Often, we are alerted to a potential mood in a text by the irritation and fascination provoked by a single word or small detail—the hint of a different tone or rhythm.

Following a hunch means trusting an implicit promise for a while and making a step toward describing a phenomenon that remains unknown—one that has aroused our curiosity and, in the case of atmospheres and moods, often envelops and even enshrouds us. When a description of this kind occurs in reference to a literary work, it is probable that the effect—up to a certain point—coincides with that of the “primary” text. Writing in this way has affinities with the conception of the literary-critical essay that Georg Lukács laid out in his 1911 book, *Soul and Form*. Lukács may have seconded Dilthey’s desire for immediate experience in reading literary texts. However, he certainly opposed the latter’s advocacy of “interpretation” as the central praxis of *Geisteswissenschaften*. Lukács demanded that essays deviate from the “scientific” goal of finding the truth. “It is right for the essayist to seek the truth,” Lukács wrote, “but he should do so in the manner of Saul. Saul set out to find his father’s donkeys and discovered a kingdom; thus will the essayist—one who is truly capable of seeking the truth—find, at the end of his way, what he has not sought: life itself.”

Lukács's distinction between "truth" and "life" sets his objectives apart from matters of "interpretation"—that is, the task of laying bare the "truth" (i.e., the propositional content) that works are presumed to contain. An essay that concentrates on atmospheres and moods will never arrive at the truth located within a text; instead, it seizes the work as a part of life in the present. This approach has consequences for the book at hand; I begin to sound the depths in some chapters, but it is impossible to assess them in their proper dimensions. Reading for *Stimmung* cannot mean "deciphering" atmospheres and moods, for they have no fixed signification. Equally little does reading for *Stimmungen* mean reconstructing or analyzing their historical or cultural genesis. Instead, it means discovering sources of energy in artifacts and giving oneself over to them affectively and bodily—yielding to them and gesturing toward them. To be sure, there is nothing wrong with reconstructing the genesis or structure of particular atmospheres and moods, but such analyses are of secondary importance. Above all, my aim is to point out *Stimmungen*, open up their dynamic potential, and promote—as much as possible—their becoming-present. To perform such deictic gestures, it is not always necessary to write on the scale of standard scholarly discussions, with their ponderous footnotes and apparatuses. Indeed, it is not even necessary to follow the development of a mood for the length of an entire work, as it unfolds in its full complexity. I am engaged in an experiment, where certainties and conventions of how to write are still undefined. In the long term, I imagine, writing under the influence of *Stimmung* may well consign vaunted "methods" to oblivion.

10

As has already been said more than once, the possibility of going beyond merely deictic gestures might be realized by following the historical emergence of atmospheres and moods and their mode of textual articulation. Such exercises are offered, for example, in the chapters on

the picaresque novel and the absence of representations of happiness in the 1920s. At the same time, it is impossible to formulate a general theory about necessary conditions for producing *Stimmung* in general—or even in particular. Favorable circumstances may be provided by events of all kinds: military victory or defeat, prosperity or poverty, nation-building or the frustration of such efforts. For the requisite density of feeling to be articulated in texts other than on the level of representation—for forms and tones to become "charged," as if by electricity—habitualization must occur. In other words: wherever *Stimmung* penetrates texts, we may assume that a primary experience has occurred to the point of becoming a preconscious reflex. Something similar occurs—on a more abstract plane—when sensitivity to *Stimmung* has been refined, as is the case in our cultural present. The book at hand, for example, began as a series of short essays on literary atmospheres and moods, which appeared a few years ago in the *Geisteswissenschaften* section of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. The series met with surprisingly broad acclaim, and the reception was more engaged and more complex than what had greeted other essays on the same pages.

Perhaps this reaction was an indication that something Wellbery mentioned at the end of his article on *Stimmung* had already become reality. At the time of writing, Wellbery had discounted a possibility for the present, but affirmed that it might yet occur:

One might suppose that the disappearance of *Stimmung* from the vocabulary of aesthetics has something to do with the fact that musical metaphors, as means of giving figural expression to psychic realities, are no longer self-evident. If this is so, then a semantic tradition reaching back to antiquity has died out. All the same, the present discussion of the concept has shown that, in the change of aesthetic notions and paradigms that has occurred, the idea of *Stimmung*, time and again, has displayed the capacity to reveal new aspects of meaning. Perhaps the adaptability of the concept will make it possible to overcome its current irrelevance and, in future semantic configurations, reveal an unexpected potential for meaning.

Since then, Wellbery has revised this assessment—or, to be more precise: he has pointed out the surprisingly rapid fulfillment of his prediction.

As far as my own view of the current situation, I would like to speak less of the development of a new “potential for meaning” than the intensified aesthetic fascination that *Stimmung* now holds; here, matters of sense and meaning are secondary. I am interested in the atmospheres and moods that literary works absorb as a form of “life”—an environment with physical substance, which “touches us as if from inside.” The yearning for *Stimmung* has grown, because many of us—perhaps older people, above all—suffer from existence in an everyday world that often fails to surround and envelop us physically. Yearning for atmosphere and mood is a yearning for presence—perhaps a variant that presupposes a pleasure in dealing with the cultural past.

To quell this yearning, we know, it is no longer necessary to associate *Stimmung* and harmony. And as long as atmospheres and moods reach us physically and affectively, it is also superfluous to seek to demonstrate that the words we use can name extra-linguistic realities. The skepticism of “constructivism” and the “linguistic turn” concerns only ontologies of literature based on the paradigm of representation. This does not matter when reading for atmospheres and moods: *they belong to the substance and reality of the world.*

## MOMENTS

## THE FREEDOM OF JANIS JOPLIN'S VOICE

WOODSTOCK," "Liverpool," "Jimi Hendrix," "Janis Joplin," and "the Rolling Stones"—maybe "Berkeley" and "Paris," too—these names conjure up a sense of intensity; in comparison, everything that followed seems flat and dull. They—the aura they possess—belong to my generation. In laying claim to this past, my generation has dragged on for more than four decades since the late Sixties, condemned to eternal youth. We tell stories of warm summer nights, unable to distinguish what is a dream and what was reality; we return to what those born later like to hear, which has always pleased us; the music and voices from the past electrify one's skin and call us away from the present. Nothing is more powerful—nothing embodies that whole world more completely—than Janis Joplin's voice in "Me and Bobby McGee." Or is it what I found out I wanted to be later—something I now project into the past? Perhaps there was never a time when Janis Joplin was as close as she is in the present—now that age appears irreversible for us.

The names and words she sings belong to an America full of charm and landscapes: Baton Rouge, New Orleans, Kentucky, Salinas, Cali-

fornia. I think of Paul Simon's gaze upon the Mississippi Delta, which seems as warm "as a national guitar" (a reference he made to the guitars manufactured by the National String Instrument Corporation, which sparkled mysteriously). Such views almost always yielded images of despairing happiness. "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose." One cannot lose more than what doesn't cost anything. These words were there for Joplin's voice, but their author could not have known she would sing them—the singer struck upon the lyrics by chance. Whoever listens, knows there is no other way. The voice sounds like dark metal, vibrating on all levels, full of mourning and hope, and so firm that an entire life can cling to it. It grows soft when memory touches the back of Bobby McGee's hand and his body, quiet and tender as his breath, warm on the singer's neck. Then, suddenly, the voice is so lonesome and so full of lost contentment that it collapses; right away, almost, it loses all definition, becoming one with the music. The different registers sound as if they were the only ones possible—as if there were no other way. They settle on one's skin and hair; if they touch you, you know that this was your youth—when life was beginning and soon would end. The sounds of the instruments are rather average. Experts agree that Joplin never got the musical accompaniment she deserved. Altogether average professional musicians of a somewhat cheap variety (like those who play in high school bands or on the B-sides of shellac phonographs) surrounded her. Joplin's voice had to break through the instruments and their uniform beat to draw them to itself.

The words, voice, and instruments yield something whose essence, like an intricately crafted narrative, defies complete understanding. No low point is lower than the opening bar: "busted flat"—blown-out like a tire—in Baton Rouge, the state capital of Louisiana, whose name promises more beauty than the place has; the singer is as washed-out as her jeans, underneath a sky filled with rainclouds; all this is presented in a voice whose powerful calm no one escapes. "Waiting for the

train." Instead, Bobby suddenly appears and thumbs a truck. As the clouds burst, the truck becomes a world unto itself, behind rhythmically beating wipers, as the three travelers head for New Orleans. They sing and play the blues—what is there to talk about, anyway? Bobby's hand holds hers; the voice that surrounds them is almost shy, out of tenderness. As far as New Orleans, this world is a good one for people who have nothing to lose and therefore nothing to expect: "Feeling good was easy, Lord, when he sang the blues." Now, the voice fills the world the travelers share, like a prayer that is not entirely sure of itself—yet there is nothing more to build on. "Feeling good was good enough for me / Good enough for me and my Bobby McGee." Joplin's voice runs from a brief moment of raw ecstasy to the point where it dissolves into indefinite syllables.

What must have begun as a coincidence in the Louisiana rain, between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, transforms into the expanse of a mythical journey from coast to coast; the voice's power carries over borders, from the coalfields of Kentucky to the Californian sun, as the singer and Bobby, under ever-changing skies, become a couple without secrets. This pair is our youth, holding close and keeping warm against the rest of the world: "Through all kinds of weather, through everything we done / Yeah, Bobby baby kept me from the cold world." Then, the voice shifts and becomes pain at the memory of what finally happened on the road between Los Angeles and San Francisco: "One day near Salinas, oh Lord, I let him slip away / He's lookin' for that home, and I hope he finds it."

Bobby may have vanished just as suddenly as he appeared in Baton Rouge—cursed by his longing for a real home. Or maybe he died on a drug trip, looking for calm and rest high above the clouds. Perhaps he sought to escape the endless freedom of being free to move ever onward. She has known this dream, too, and she does not complain: "I hope he finds it." However, she has forever lost the freedom of an existence that had nothing to lose—and this freedom went missing

long before. Now, she would exchange all the days of the future for one day of that happy, brief past: "I'd trade all my tomorrows for one single yesterday / To be holdin' Bobby's body next to mine." This is the tragedy that threatens all love and all happiness—the tragedy of seeking happiness in the first place—and, even, the tragedy of believing that happiness exists at all. Happiness, when it is possessed, undoes the great freedom of those who have nothing left to lose. Happiness makes you vulnerable. For this reason, a softer, more open, more alluring, or more delicate voice has never existed. "To be holdin' Bobby's body next to mine. . . ." A more despairing voice has never existed, either, for her arms remain empty even as she sings.

When Bobby vanishes in Salinas, she regains the freedom of those who have nothing left to lose. Memory, however, transforms regained freedom into eternal loss. The voice assumes a cutting tone, then becomes irresistible sweetness. Finally, it goes over into composed grief:

Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose  
Nothing, and that's all that Bobby left me, yeah  
But feeling good was easy, Lord, when he sang the blues  
Hey feeling good was good enough for me, hmm-mm  
Good enough for me and Bobby McGee.

The voice sidles up to the music, unable to find further words. In the present, she dreams about the past; it is as if she were on a third journey—after the one between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, and the other one, from Kentucky to California. On this final trip, Bobby's name is invoked and takes on form and substance, like a song emerging from different sounds. Only one more time can the voice lay hold to more than a name; only once more does it find the words that make the singer into Bobby's wife and widow; just once more does she sing—as if she were stumbling into the future—words that give form to her loss:

Lord, I called him my lover, called him my man  
 I said, called him my lover just the best I can, c'mon  
 And a, and a, Bobby, oh, and a Bobby McGee, yeah. . . .

There follows a whole minute of the standard musical background of Joplin's times. From afar, one hears her voice once or twice more before, at the end—as if saying goodbye and casting a spell in the same breath—she gives her body over to his name, to make him present a final time.



Even without the voice and music, we can see, the words would retain their literary and historical qualities. However, the drama of the song and its power over listeners depend much less on words and images than one might think on the basis of how I have been representing it. The drama of “Me and Bobby McGee” occurs, above all, through the modulations and metamorphoses of Joplin's voice. Its pathos can also grip listeners who do not understand English, for the song uses words as forms; only in a secondary sense is the meaning of words important. The emotions, atmospheres, and moods that such a powerful voice summons forth are certain; anyone who has heard the song knows what they are, even though we have no concepts that might permit us to grasp them and share them with others descriptively.

As a matter of principle, recordings of voices from the past—more than is the case with moving images—reach our bodies under conditions that are hardly different from the way we experience live sound. This technical circumstance may explain why, already soon after its invention, the gramophone became associated with death—or, more precisely, with the survival of the dead. The famous trademark, “His Master's Voice,” illustrates the matter. The phenomenon was even more pronounced during the First World War, when—to unsettling effect—soldiers left records playing at posts they had abandoned in

the trenches. In precisely this way, the recordings of Joplin's songs and voice keep alive the existential *Stimmung* of youth that has passed—a state that is condensed into two lyrical sequences in “Me and Bobby McGee”: “Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose,” and, in contrast, “I'd trade all my tomorrows for one single yesterday.”

The case of “Me and Bobby McGee” and Janis Joplin is singularly dramatic, however. This is not just true because, for many years, Joplin was erotically involved with Kris Kristofferson (who, by the way, initially wrote the song for a male voice, which implies that the part of Bobby McGee was originally a female role). In addition, the recording featuring Joplin's voice was made in Sunset Sound Studios in Los Angeles, just a few days before the singer's body was found dead (on Sunday October 4, 1970), in the Landmark Motor Motel; her Porsche, which was famous for its “psychedelic” paintjob, was parked outside. The reason for her death is supposed to have been an overdose of heroin. Friends had reason to believe that Joplin's dealer had delivered unusually strong “stuff” the previous week. On her left breast, Joplin had a small tattoo of a heart. Like many other artists of her time, she had arranged for her body to be burned and the ashes to be scattered over the Pacific.

Four decades later, it is impossible for me to say if the feeling of having “nothing left to lose”—or, at any rate, “wanting to have nothing left to lose”—really reached me in its full power years ago. Perhaps a great part of our “generational experience” was, in fact, rather superficial adaptation to convention. Only now, when we have become a generation of often infantile old people—somewhere between our fading parents, against whom we wanted to rebel, and younger people, who have effortlessly surpassed us—only now do we really appreciate what the promises of those months were, which I think back to as if they had been a short, eternal summer. In Janis Joplin's voice, we recall a freedom we did not sense in the present of the past. The fact that “Me and Bobby McGee” was recorded so close to the moment

at which Joplin died gives the voice and the atmospheres and moods it calls forth an authenticity that grips us—authenticity in the face of approaching death. This authenticity permits us to sense a broad scar on the formerly suntanned back of our generation that never grew up. We have forever missed our date with Janis Joplin.

## SITUATIONS