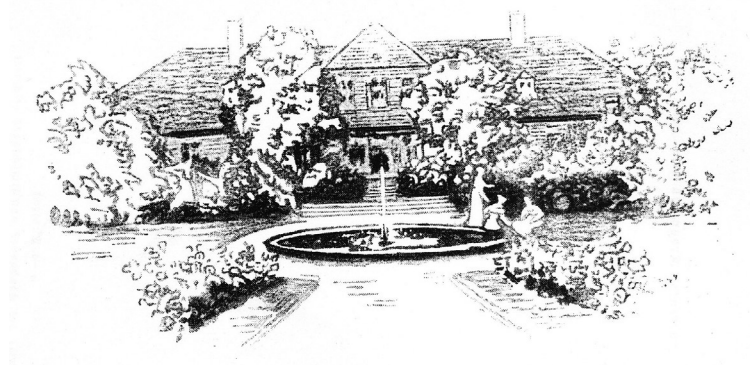
Cobweb Stories: Jakob von Uexküll and the *Stone of Werder*

Tobias Cheung

The *Stone of Werder*, written in German (*Der Stein von Werder*), is, except for *Biological Letters to a Woman* (1920a),[1] the only novel that Uexküll published in his lifetime. Uexküll also wrote some short stories (cf. 1920b), autobiographical texts (cf. 1936a), an interpretation of Plato's *Menon* (cf. Uexküll, Uexküll 1944) and various articles on politics and social order (cf. 1919, 1920c). However, he was mainly interested in the biological theory of animal subjectivity and, parallel to it, in the theory of meaning (*Bedeutungslehre*).[2]

Human subjects are, for Uexküll, able to 'make experiences' (*Erfahrungen*), to 'acquire' (*erwerben*) an umwelt and to 'understand' at least some aspects of their being-in-the-world (cf. 1936b: 219; 1940: 65; Uexküll, Uexküll 1944: 39–44. See also Schmidt 1980: 30–31). In *The Stone of Werder*, Uexküll presents humans as storytelling subjects. In the first part of the novel, he calls their stories 'cobwebs'. Outlines of these stories will be reconstructed in the first section of this essay. Two themes of Uexküll's theoretical biology that frequently appear in the cobweb stories – the monadic subject and the composition of nature – are discussed in the second section. In the third section, I will analyse the narrative plot of the second part of the novel, in which Uexküll introduces different readers of the inscription on the Stone of Werder. The fourth section focuses on the problem that the inscription has different meanings for its readers. Finally, I will discuss the relation between storytelling subjects, cobweb stories and the different meanings of the Stone of Werder, together with the themes of death, dreams and fate. A new, typewritten version of the end of the novel, which Uexküll added to the printed version, can be found in the sixth section.



[1] References to Uexküll's writings comprise the year of publication only.

[2] His most important books in this perspective are *The Umwelt and Innerr World of Animals* (*Umwelt und Innenwelt der Tiere*, 1909), *Theoretical Biology* (*Theoretische Biologie*, 1920, 1928) and *Strolls through the Umwelten of Animals and Humans* (*Streifzüge durch die Umwelten von Tieren und Menschen*, 1934).

I The cobweb stories

The novel begins with an introduction. Uexküll describes a scene in a garden before a mansion.[3] Three young women are sitting around a fountain, next to the Stone of Werder:[4] Dorothea, Julie and Louise. The scene is visible in a drawing by Franz Huth.[5] The young women are the daughters of somebody named Helwig. When Julie asks Dorothea to decipher the inscription on the Stone of Werder, Dorothea remarks that there is a web of a spider above the stone. Afterwards, she begins to tell a story that is related to cobwebs.

The first part of the novel is divided into three chapters and one intermezzo. Each chapter chains together stories of the history of one sister. The titles of the different chapters are 'The First Cobweb' (Dorothea), 'The Second Cobweb' (Julie) and 'The Third Cobweb' (Louise). The stories refer to various actors in different cultural and national contexts, to myths, to scientific theories, to events that happened hundreds of years ago, and to events that have occurred in the time period contemporary with the storyteller.

In the first chapter, various stories of spiders and their cobwebs 'rank around' (*ranken sich um*) the family story of Lord Hüsny (1940: 14–15). The family story dates back to the time of Mohammed, when Hüsny's progenitor Hussein found the prophet in a cave. A cobweb covered parts of the entrance to the cave. Lord Hüsny later died on a trip to Brindisi. Before he left, a cobweb in the doorframe of his apartment hindered him from passing through the door. He thought that it was a warning sign and asked for an escort. The dragoman who escorted him killed him. Before his death, Hüsny had written a letter to Dorothea to inform her of the cobweb in the doorframe. Later on, she heard of his death.

Uexküll used three narrative levels in Dorothea's cobweb story, and he continued to use them in the other stories. On the first level (the author[6] level), Dorothea begins 'her' story. On the second level (the actor level), actors are involved in multiple events. They often begin to tell new stories. On the third level (the

[3] Uexküll's description refers to a mansion from the 18th century that was located on the island of Werder in Estonia. It was destroyed during World War II.

[4] The stone was transported to Jakob von Uexküll's summer residence on the island of Pucht. The summer residence still exists, but the stone has disappeared.

[5] It is the drawing above this section (1940: 7). The stone is the round object beside the three daughters on the right side of the fountain. Franz Huth is mentioned on the cover page of *The Stone of Werder*.

[6] The author of a narrative within the novel.

reflexive level), the storyteller of the author level or an actor of the actor level initiates a reflection on the story. Some actors write letters in which they interpret events or their relations with friends.[7] In the case of the letter of Hüsny to Dorothea, it turns out that Hüsny's interpretation of the cobweb in the doorframe as a sign of warning resulted in the 'wrong' choice. The meaning of the cobweb in the doorframe thus also depends on the narrative level: it is a warning in the perspective of Hüsny, and at the same time it is, as Julie says at the end of the first chapter, the 'cause of his death' (1940: 18).

In the second chapter, Julie says at the beginning that she can also 'report on a strange cobweb' (*über ein sonderbares Spinnennetz berichten,* 1940: 19). The main theme of the first part of her story is a discussion between the German doctor Erhardt and the Italian archbishop Grimani. The doctor defends a nomothetic, and the archbishop an idiographic position: natural scientists search for general rules and laws that determine the properties of individuals, whereas priests teach that the individual can never be understood in terms of general laws of nature, but only through its unique soul (*einzigartige Seele*, cf. 1940: 23–29). The unique and the general, or human lives and nature's laws, are thus opposed.

The discussion ends more or less abruptly when the doctor begins a new story (the second part of Julie's story) to avoid a serious 'dispute' (1940: 29) with the archbishop. A cobweb plays a central, and yet ambiguous, role in the story: the head of a 'negro' rolls from Erhardt's hands straight into the house of a shoemaker's shop, destroying a cobweb within the doorframe. The shoemaker, shocked by the event, becomes seriously ill and tells the doctor that he recognises the head as that of a man who was hunted by citizens of the neighbouring town after a white woman had been abused. The shoemaker, thirteen years old at that time, threw a fishing-net over the fleeing 'negro', and a butcher in the crowd beheaded him with an axe. Later on, the shoemaker worries more and more about that what he has done. He can not see a cobweb anymore without tearing it to pieces. The day before the head rolled into his shop, he had seen a spider that was spinning a net above the doorframe. As if he could 'foresee' (*ahnen*)[8] that this was a sign for him, he did not dare to disturb the spider. The shoemaker dies at the end of the story (1940: 29–35). The reflexive level of the story is part of the 'Intermezzo' (1940: 37–38).

[7] Cf. the letters of Hüsny (1940: 17–18) and Clarissa (1940: 61–70).

[8] Uexküll uses the expression 'a day full of presentiment' (*ahnungsvoller Tag*) (1940: 34).

The 'Intermezzo' begins with a short reference to the garden scene of the introduction. All three sisters sit facing each other, but they look, 'silently' (*schweigend*), in different directions: Julie looks down into the glittering water, Louise looks at the clouds that move over the blue sky, and Dorothea looks in front of her at the ground and draws circles in the sand that overlap each other many times. This scene reveals a thematic constellation.

Uexküll had already referred to the glittering of water in *The Theory of Life*, published ten years earlier than *The Stone of Werder*, as a metaphor for the reflection of the outer world in the subject. The whole world is, according to Uexküll, 'reflected' (*gespiegelt*) in dewdrops that glitter on leaves. The reflected world is always the same world, 'repeated a hundred-thousand times', but it is differently reflected in each dewdrop (1930: 127). A similar image appears also at the end of the introduction to *The Stone of Werder*, when Dorothea remarks that the threads of a cobweb above the stone are 'glittering and sparkling' through the tiny water drops blown over from the fountain (1940: 8).[9] The 'drifting' (*Zug*) of the clouds over the blue sky seems to be a metaphor for the changing phenomena of perceptions, and Dorothea's circles refer to the role of the same event in different umwelten of subjects. The scene thus combines the themes of repetition (as reflection or representation), change and individuality.

After a period of silence, Dorothea suddenly begins to speak. She points out that there is a 'strange similarity' (*merkwürdige Ähnlichkeit*) in her and Julie's story. In both stories, 'circumstances [*Begebenheiten*] that are, taken in themselves [*an sich*], meaningless become the fate of somebody' (1940: 37). Dorothea suggests that events are 'in themselves' neither meaningful nor meaningless. They only become meaningful if they appear, at a given time and in a certain place, in the umwelt of a human subject.

Dorothea continues, saying that the meaning of cobwebs in her stories is not a meaning by chance. Rather, it is related to a subject that is 'guided' by its fate. Fate is, according to Dorothea, 'rooted' (*verankert*) in the soul of the humans who 'transfer their fate to the outside and bind it to some meaningless objects [*Bedeutungslosigkeiten*]' (1940: 38).

Uexküll's notion of 'fate' is quite obscure. The notion becomes even more problematic in the third chapter. Louise, who criticised Dorothea's idea at the

[9] Uexküll refers also to the metaphor of water drops from a fountain to describe the dispersal of 'properties' in a germ cell (1910a: 1591).

end of the intermezzo, refers to the theme of 'fate' (unknown to its bearers) in a series of four short stories (1940: 39–46). These stories represent the first part of the third chapter. In each story, Louise appears as a woman with a 'clairvoyant gift' (*hellseherische Gabe*, 1940: 44), which is, according to Doctor Erhardt, the 'illness' of poets (1940: 45): to foresee in the constellation of certain events somebody's death.

The second part of the third chapter begins with the 'history in Capri' (1940: 46–73). The story reformulates the problematic setting of the conflict between Doctor Erhardt and the Italian archbishop Grimani, but new actors take over their positions: the Marchese Tre Case,[10] a representative of the natural scientists who 'count and measure' to distinguish the veil of perception from reality (1940: 53), and the bishop of Capri, who points to the irreducible, non-countable and non-measurable monadic individuality of human beings (1940: 55–58).

Tre Case finally rejects the 'Leibnitian quirk' of the bishop and emphasises his own point of view that there are only mechanical effects of causes that 'begin in chaos and end in chaos' (1940: 59). Louise now opens a second, parallel storyline.

The reader has already been informed of Tre Case's marriage to Clarissa Rysoor, who died 'half a year ago' from a lung disease on Capri (1940: 48–49). After Tre Case's rejection of the Leibnitian quirk, Louise has a vision during the night. She sees in a scene that is both dream-like and realistic the figure of a woman dressed in white in Clarissa's old room.[11] The woman eagerly writes a letter on a worktable and hides the letter in a narrow drawer that Louise has not noticed before (1940: 60–61). Louise, who immediately falls asleep after the event, wakes up to find a letter written by Clarissa in the drawer. The letter is written in Italian, and Louise reads the letter aloud to her sisters in German (1940: 62–67).

Uexküll thus begins the reflexive narrative of an actor. In her letter, Clarissa focuses on the notion of pre-stabilised harmony and relates it to the procedure necessary to create the contrapuntal composition of a duet. She projects the order of a contrapuntal composition on the relation of human subjects to their environment and also on the relations among human subjects themselves (especially those between men and women). The message of Clarissa to Tre Case is clear: natural laws, established by scientists, as well as the relations between men and women, are part of the 'big composition' of nature. Love is just another word for

[10] Tre Case is also the nephew of the bishop.

[11] During the whole first part of the novel, Uexküll mentions only the first names of women.

these contrapuntal relations. After a second letter written by Clarissa about her near death – a letter also written during the night by a woman dressed in white – Tre Case accepts Clarissa's viewpoint that there is a 'musical law' in the order of the stars,[12] and that this order has its origin in God. In an apocalyptic scene, Louise watches Tre Case embark on a skiff next to the cliffs of Faraglioni. At the same time, the shining figure of a woman appears on another skiff somewhere on the dark sea. Tre Case's skiff finally sinks after some dramatic events (a part of the rocky cliff falls into the water and produces a huge water column). The next day, fishermen find a 'body without a soul' (*entseelten Körper*).

Together with the plot of the second part, the discussion of the narrative structures of the cobweb stories continues in the third, fourth and fifth sections. I will first examine monadic subjects and the composition of nature as two recurrent themes in each of the cobweb stories.

II Monadic subjects and the composition of nature

The notion of monadic individual subjects is first mentioned by the Bishop of Capri in the third chapter of the first part of the novel (1940: 55–57). He argues, in opposition to Tre Case's position, that individual subjects constitute reality. To sustain his claim, he refers to Leibniz's monadic philosophy:[13]

> The great philosopher Leibniz thought … of the monad as a kind of a soap bubble, in which all men and animals are supposed to be – each one in his own monad that totally isolates him from all the other monads.[14] (1940: 55.)

Each monad is, according to the bishop, a 'personal monad' (1940: 55) that produces its own reality through its perceptions, for which a somehow semi-transparent border – 'a kind of a soap bubble' – between inside and outside is a necessary precondition. However, the monad cannot perceive itself from a point of view outside of its perceived world. It has to exist within its own world. Against this strong individualistic claim, Tre Case objects that it is evident, not only in a

[12] The meaning of the order of the stars in the night sky is already a theme at the beginning of the story (1940: 42ff). It is a frequent topos in Uexküll's writings. He often sets the meaningless sky of the astronomers in opposition to his concept of umwelt (cf. 1930: 125–126; Uexküll, Kriszat 1934: 100–101). The 'starry sky' was also the title of a book by Jean-Louis Fabre (translated into German by Kasimir Graff in 1911).

[13] For Leibniz's organic model of monadic order, see Duchesneau 1998 and Cheung 2004.

[14] The metaphor of the soap bubble (*Seifenblase*) can also be found in 1927b: 700 and 1931: 391. All translations are by the author of this essay.

scientific description but also in our common understanding of the world, that the island of Capri is the same for all its observers (1940: 57).

In her first letter to Tre Case, Clarissa refers to the notion of the monadic individual subject within a 'composition' of worlds (1940: 62–65). Instead of emphasising the individuality of subjects, Clarissa focuses on that which is common among them. She begins with a reference to music. Tre Case taught her how to compose a duet through 'point and counterpoint'. She relates the order that results from such a contrapuntal composition between two subjects to the existential mode of Leibniz's monadic subjects that only perceive their own worlds, but depend on each other through a 'pre-stabilised harmony' (1940: 63). No monad can express itself, play its own melody, as Clarissa expresses it, without being 'interwoven' in the composition of the expressions of all the other monads (1940: 64). Each subject is a world apart, but it is also 'formed by the sound' (*durchtönt*) of the universal composition (1940: 64–65). The fate of each subject seems to be the melody that it has to play.

Clarissa emphasises that all monadic melodies are composed in a specific way. They are 'complementary' to each other, as in a contrapuntal composition (1940: 63–64). One specific melody always corresponds to another, and all melodies correspond to each other in the plan of nature. Leibniz's pre-stabilised harmony thus results, for Clarissa, from a contrapuntal composition.[15] Divine music, not chaotic events, structures the human and the natural world. As manifold as the worlds of each individual subject might be, they are always 'formed by the sound of God' (1940: 65).[16]

After her comparison between the contrapuntal composition and the existential conditions of monadic individual subjects, Clarissa refers to two 'proofs' of a pre-stabilised harmony 'in nature' (cf. 1940: 63–67). The first proof is a description of the contrapuntal relationship between nature and culture. In Clarissa's flat home country,[17] thousands of windmills 'grow against' (*entgegen wachsen*) the wind to produce white flour from golden grain (1940: 64). She interprets this as a contrapuntal relationship, in which the windmills are 'composed for the wind' (*zum Winde hinzukomponiert*, 1940: 64).

[15] In an article in 1935, H. Lassen emphasises that 'the monadological approach of the umweltlehre comes to exactly the same conclusion that Leibniz also attained, that is to say the metaphysical harmony of the worlds' (Lassen 1935: 493).

[16] Uexküll even nominalises the verb *durchtönen* as *die von Gott Durchtönten*.

[17] This is probably Holland (cf. 1940: 48).

The second proof is a comparison between the *personae* of a stage play and individual subjects in nature (1940: 64–66). When Clarissa read the list of the *personae* of Shakespeare's Hamlet in a theatre in Amsterdam, she had the sudden insight that the noun *person* comes from the Latin verb *personnare*,[18] which means 'to be formed by a tone'.[19] Natural individuals or individual subjects are formed by the tone of the divine composition as *personae*, formed by the plan of the poet. Every actor plays only his/her own role, which appears in the list of the programme, but all roles together form the whole composition.

This comparison dates back to Stoic principles.[20] However, Uexküll claims that humans can understand how these 'roles' function in the divine play (1940: 65). This is also one of the main objectives of his general theory of biology. Animal subjects 'fit', with their perceptions and actions, into the 'counter-structure' (*Gegengefüge*) of their umwelten. All umwelten 'fit' again with each other in the plan of nature:

> It can be proved that, on the one hand, each organism has a different umwelt, to which it is adjusted with accuracy, and that, on the other hand, its relationships with other organisms fit not only into [their] external properties, but also into [their] construction plans. (1927a: 21.)

Herder referred to the web of a spider to explain the simultaneous co-constitution between the subject and its outer environment. This is a passage of Herder's *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, published between 1784 and 1788:

> The web of the spider, what else is it than the *extended self* of the spider [*der Spinne verlängertes Selbst*] to get its prey? [---] The one who organised its body, and all forces in this body, formed also the spider organically to its web. (Herder 1966: 93–94.)

The spider, which is organically formed to its web, exists only because the web is also organically formed to the spider's prey. Complementarity as a principle of organic order between a spider and a fly is also mentioned in the second chapter of *The Stone of Werder*. Doctor Erhardt points out that the cobweb is not only spider-like, but also fly-like, because 'you can infer from the size of the meshes, the

[18] It should be *personare*.

[19] This idea can still be found in some recent etymological dictionaries, but it is largely criticised, because the long 'ō' in persōna does not correspond to the short 'ŏ' in *persŏnare*. The word persôna is perhaps borrowed from the Etruscan *phersu* ('mask') or from the Greek πρόσωπον ('look', 'expression').

[20] Cf. Epiktet 1992, n. 17, with the title *Life as a Drama*.

solidity of the tissue, and the fineness of the thread, as well as from its adhesive strength, the main characteristics of the fly' (1940: 23). Thus, the spider produces structures, or expresses itself in a way that is complementary to the umwelt in and through which it exists. The same argumentation can already be found in *Strolls through the Umwelten of Animals and Humans*, published in 1934. The cobweb is made 'fly-like' (*fliegenhaft*) because the spider itself is 'fly-like' (Uexküll, Kriszat 1934: 145. Cf. 1930: 154–155 and 1950: 120–121).[21]

Clarissa only once mentions a biological example in her letter. In her first proof, she refers to the seeds of the dandelion, which are 'composed for' the wind (1940: 64). However, she changes quickly to a comparison between *personae* and individual subjects. Rudolf Bilz made a similar comparison in *Pars pro toto*, published in the same year as *The Stone of Werder*. In the seventh chapter (with the title 'Scenic Semantics', Bilz 1940: 37–42) of the first part,[22] Bilz analyses – with reference to Uexküll – the 'sensory dovetailing' (*sensorische Verzahnung*) of animals in 'vital scenes' (Bilz 1940: 11; see also Schmidt 1980: 183–184). These scenes are part of the 'great programme of nature' (*großer Spielplan der Natur*, Bilz 1940: 25). The bat and the butterfly or the bee and the flower are 'scenically predetermined for each other' (*szenisch vorherbestimmt füreinander*; Bilz 1940: 25). A part of the whole bat is in the auditory canal of the butterfly (Bilz 1940: 13). Bilz's *pars pro toto* principle thus corresponds to Uexküll's notion of *Einpassung* and *Gegengefüge*.[23] For both, the flexibility or the mimic potential of the natural individual to choose its role from an 'arsenal of masks' (Bilz 1940: 37) depends on its position in the scale of being. However, the 'essential character' of a subject always expresses a specific 'game-style' (Bilz 1940: 37).

Schmidt has analysed in detail how Bilz's and Uexküll's role and character theory have been influenced by the Leipzig school of *Gestaltpsychologie* and re-

[21] Another, often used example from Uexküll is the relationship between bats, their 'squeaky voice' (*Piepton*) and butterflies (cf. Uexküll, Kriszat 1934: 128; Uexküll 1937: 195). The bat example, with a reference to Uexküll's writings, can also be found in Bilz 1940: 13.

[22] The first part has the title 'Biological systems of order'.

[23] For the notions of *Einpassung* and *Gegengefüge* in Uexküll's writings, see Cheung 2005a and 2005b. As Bilz, Uexküll refers to the expression 'stages of the world' (*Weltbühnen*) for the umwelten in which individuals act, and to their 'role' in a 'piece' (*Stück*) that is mise-en-scène by a 'stage-master' (*Bühnenmeister*, cf. 1940: 57–58). In *The Almighty Life* (*Das allmächtige Leben*), published posthumously in 1950, Uexküll mentions Bilz and his 'vital scenes' in a chapter with the title 'Life as a drama' (1950: 55, 154–155). Uexküll also mentions Pavlov in this context (1950: 156). On Bilz, see also Uexküll 1947: 17.

search programs on 'archetypes' and 'instincts' (cf. Schmidt 1980: 181–183).[24] Hans Volkelt, one of the founders of the Leipzig school, explicitly refers to the relationship between the spider and the fly to characterise the initiation of a behavioural role through the 'situation' fly-in-the-net (Volkelt 1914: 181; cf. Schmidt 1980: 181). Also Friedrich Alverdes, who worked on sensory physiology in Halle from 1920 on, refers to the spider-net relationship to show that an archetype 'resonates' in the environment. For him, the cobweb is the 'performative type' (*Leistungstyp*) of the spider, through which it exists in its environment (Alverdes 1937: 227; cf. Schmidt 1980: 182). Instead of 'empathy [*Einfühlung*] in the soul of the fly' (as first suggested by Louise), it is thus possible, according to Uexküll, to 'observe the life of a fly over a longer period and to find out which things – food, an enemy, an obstacle or a partner for mating – are treated by her as fly-like' (Uexküll, Uexküll 1944: 15).

Monadic individual subjects and the composition of nature also play an important role in the second part of the novel. However, it seems that the stories of the chapters of the second part 'rank around' a lifeless, inorganic object: the Stone of Werder and its inscription. 'The Stone of Werder' is also the title of both chapters of the second part.

The stories of the two chapters are related to the letters carved into the stone. The stone itself is only the medium or the carrier of these letters. It guarantees their persistence over a long time period. Time and text merge in different stories with various interpretations of subjects that try to understand the original inscription.

III The Stone of Werder

There is a time jump between the end of the first part and the beginning of the second. The first chapter of the second part begins with a scene in one of the mansion's rooms on the island of Werder.[25] Dorothea sings a song. Her formerly blond hair now has streaks of silver. She talks about her husband and her son Thure, both of whom died in the interval. Her stories are, as the stories of her sisters, mnemonic stories shared with others. Dorothea speaks with 'the old Propst

[24] Schmidt refers to the writings of Hans Volkelt and Friedrich Alverdes. Besides Alverdes (1937: 38–39), Bilz mentions Viktor von Weizsäcker's book *Der Gestaltkreis* (1940). Weizsäcker was Bilz's teacher in Heidelberg (Bilz 1940: 14, footnote 1).

[25] In a letter to the artist Huth, Uexküll calls this room the 'Dutch room' (*holländischer Saal*) (Letter from Uexküll to Franz Huth of March 2, 1940 – Uexküll archive of Tartu, Jakob von Uexküll Centre)

Harten'. She waits for the arrival of Jelisabetta Alexandrowna Petrow, who begins thereafter to tell her story (1940: 92–98).

Jelisabetta did not hinder her brother from engaging in a mortal conflict with Thure, who should have become her fiancé. She heard that the last words of Thure were 'God is my rescue, small is your gain' (*Gott ist mein Hilf, klein ist dein Gewinn*; 1940: 97). She knows that these words are written on a stone in the garden of his summer residence on the island of Werder. Jelisabetta has the feeling that Thure 'might have wanted to say more' (1940: 97). She wants to see the inscription on the stone. While Harten (the priest) is listening, she reads the following text in a shivering voice:

> *Du schickst mich in den Tod,*
> *Gott ist mein Hilf,*
> *Klein ist dein Gewinn.*[26] (1940: 98.)

Harten immediately objects:

> No, that is not written on the stone. But everybody *reads* [my emphasis – *T. C.*] the truth in it of which he is most afraid. (1940: 98.)

Uexküll informs the reader that the first story of the Stone of Werder 'ends' after Harten's objection.

The second chapter begins with a list of historical 'facts' that reach from the occupation of Estonia through the Russian and Swedish empire in the Middle Ages to the present time of the main storyteller of the second chapter.[27] This storyteller is Uexküll, weaving himself into the net of narratives (1940: 99–100).

After a dense and highly selective description of events during the Livonian war in Estonia (at the turn of the 17th century) and a short story about the widow of an exiled Swedish aristocratic family, the Banèr, who lives on the island of Werder, the reader gets the information that the last phrases of her husband, before he was beheaded, were 'God is my rescue'.

---

[26] You send me to death. God is my rescue, Small is your gain.

[27] At the end of the first part, Uexküll asks the following question: 'But from where comes [*stammt*] the stone?' The question points to the difference between a *Geschichte vom* (a story about) and a *Geschichte des* (a story of) the Stone of Werder. The first *Geschichte* is the story of a storyteller, told from a subjective point of view, while the second *Geschichte* points to an objective history, a story that does not depend on the subject telling it, but only on the objective history of the stone itself. The end of the first chapter thus announces a shift from the story of a storyteller to a story of *the* history of the origin of the Stone of Werder.

The Stone of Werder itself dates back to the childhood of the son of the beheaded Banèr, who grew up under the rule of Gustav Adolf. The stone seems to be a gravestone, but Uexküll does not explicitly mention it. After a lot of time had passed, and at least five aristocratic families had been the owners of the mansion, Jakob von Uexküll found the stone, hidden under herbaceous borders, and transported it to his summer residence on the island of Pucht.

Uexküll introduces himself, in the first person, in a relative clause on the second page of the chapter. He immediately switches to a 'new story' (1940: 100). The author of the novel thus becomes himself the storyteller of a cobweb.

It is the story of a beautiful lady in blue, Mrs. Stein, who comes to Pucht to visit places of her childhood. When she sees the inscription on the stone, she is deeply moved. She reads 'Gott ist min Hilf, klein ist din Gwin', and interprets it as the inscription of a gravestone for a very unhappy woman (1940: 108). She is certain that the one to whom the inscription was addressed removed the first lines (1940: 107). Shortly after reading the inscription, she hastily leaves the island.

One year later, Uexküll hears the rumour that Dr. Stein, the husband of the lady in blue, has been accused of poisoning his wife with morphine. Another year passes. Martha Sichardt, a woman dressed in white, comes to the island. She might have married Dr. Stein, but she found a 'strange note' by Mrs. Stein written right before her death:

God ist min Hilf. Klein ist din Gwin – Stein von Werder auf der Insel Pucht.[28] (1940: 113.)

When Mrs. Sichardt hands the note over to Uexküll, she remarks that this text 'makes no sense' and that the 'inscription *must* have been longer' (1940: 113–114; my emphasis – *T. C.*). In a dream, she saw a woman dressed in blue who guided her to the stone with the inscription. Uexküll confirms that this stone exists, but informs here that the part of the inscription that she wants to read 'is not readable any more' (1940: 117). He leaves her alone with the stone, and thinks about what Mrs. Stein might have 'read in the stone' (*im Stein gelesen*). Suddenly, a blue light pours over the stone, and he can read the missing lines which 'themselves form a distinct script':

Du schickst mich in den Tod. Gott ist mein Hilf, klein ist dein Gewinn.[29] (1940: 118.)

[28] God is my rescue. Small is your gain – Stone of Werder on the island Pucht.
[29] You send me to death. God is my rescue, small is your gain.

This is the end of the novel, but Uexküll later added a typewritten text.[30] In this addendum,[31] Uexküll emphasises that Mrs. Sichardt read the full extent of the inscription and returned, with a fierce determination, to her school. After she had left, the island 'sank back into its dream', and the Stone of Werder showed, unchanged, its 'mysterious inscription'.

IV The readers of the Stone of Werder

Except for Propst Harten and (the storyteller) Uexküll, the readers of the Stone of Werder think that the meaning of the stone can be found in the inscription itself. The inscription has, besides its 'history', a factual and a textual status. It is carved into the stone in letters, words and phrases. At the beginning of the second chapter, Uexküll mentions that the letters have been carved into a flat round limestone in seven lines. But only the 'second half' of the inscription is 'readable'. The first 'half' has been 'knocked out with a pickaxe' (1940: 100). However, it is not clear if there are still traces of the letters.[32] It is also not clear how many lines are still 'readable'. Uexküll cites the still 'readable' inscription in one line:

> *Gott ist min Hilf, Klein ist din Gwin. 1613.*[33] (1940: 100.)

Only at the end of the novel (or on the cover page[34]), does the reader find a hand-painted drawing of the stone together with its inscription:

GOTT
IST MIN HILF
KLEIN IST DIN
GWIN
1613

Thus, the reader can infer from the image that the still 'readable' text has five lines, and that the text that is missing had two or three lines.

[30] The German text can be found in Section VI of this essay.

[31] For the addendum, see Section VI of this essay.

[32] Uexküll says later on that the letters are *unleserlich* (1940: 117). *Unleserlich* can refer to a text that is very difficult to read or to a text that has been completely deleted. Uexküll never refers to any traces of the inscription.

[33] The text is written in Middle High German: 'God is my rescue, Small is your gain. 1613.'

[34] The cover page of the novel represents the drawing at the beginning of this essay.

The different readers of the stone present the text of the inscription in different versions. These versions are sometimes written notes (1940: 113), or they refer to the memories of other readers (cf. 1940: 97). This is a list of the different versions of the inscription:

Du schickst mich in den Tod,
Gott ist mein Hilf,
Klein ist dein Gewinn. (1940: 98.)

Gott ist min Hilf, klein ist din Gwin (1940: 107.)

Gott ist min Hilf. Klein ist din Gwin – Stein von Werder auf der Insel Pucht. (1940: 113.)

Du schickst mich in den Tod. Gott ist mein Hilf. Klein ist dein Gewinn. (1940: 118.)

The versions differ in orthography, in German (Middle High German and High German), in syntax, and in their extent. All of them differ from the 'readable' text in the drawing of the inscription.

The differences in the texts result from that what the reader actually reads (as in the cases of Jelisabetta and Uexküll himself) or memorises of the inscription after reading it (as in the cases of Thure's last words and Mrs. Sichardt). Uexküll uses these readings to emphasise that one cannot directly infer its meaning from the materiality of a text. Rather, each text has to be read. The meaning of the inscription on the Stone of Werder is always the one of its reader (as Propst Harten says). Each text, that is read, becomes for Uexküll also a part of the perceived reality of the subject that tries to understand it.

A text is, in general, for Uexküll not different from any other cluster of signs that subjects perceive in nature. It is a part of the 'net of the transmission of stimuli' (*Netz der Reizübertragung*) in the subject, although it is a 'stimulant' (*Reizmittel*) of an 'enormous perfection and refining' (*unerhörte Vervollkommnung und Verfeinerung*) (1919: 88).[35]

The read text is part of the microstructure of the umwelt of its reader, and this microstructure is specific for each individual reader. The meaning of a text is not stored in its semantic code or in its letters, words, or phrases, and it is also not transferred as a fixed message from the one who wrote it to its reader. Meaning is produced in the moment of reading, and it depends on contextual settings.

[35] A similar argument can already be found in Charles Bonnet's *Essai analytique sur les facultés de l'âme* (1760), § 221–224.

However, Uexküll says little about the status and the role of the conventions that are part of these contextual settings. He focuses on individual readers and their particular actual situations, which are informed by particular life (hi)stories. The 'web' between stories is always the cobweb of another storyteller.

Uexküll uses the fragmented text of the Stone of Werder to emphasise this perspective. As a text that 'does not make sense', its seemingly hidden meaning attracts various readers, but from different perspectives. Readers of the inscription search for more than what is (actually) written. They think that the original text 'must have been longer' (cf. 1940: 113–114; see also 1940: 97) without knowing its history.

In an ironic turn in the story about Mrs. Sichardt, Uexküll refers to the impossibility of reading the 'objective truth' of a text. Mrs. Sichardt (a teacher in a Silesian village) sees her life's work in a 'fight against individual opinions'. She searches 'honestly for the objective truth' at the 'bottom' (*Grund*) of things to show her students 'the real world' (1940: 112). However, she only finds the true meaning of the note from Mrs. Stein in *her* interpretation of the inscription that 'has to be longer', as she herself says, 'to make sense'.

The umwelt of reading subjects is itself part of higher ordered units. Uexküll rarely mentions the influence of cultural or social settings on the reading subject (cf. 1940: 64). But he describes the 'characters' or 'local tones' of landscapes (as in the painting of Dorothea's father, which should represent the 'local tone' of Holland, 1940: 83–86) and the 'life-rhythm of landscapes' (cf. 1940: 24). Landscapes function here as scenes, in which the folk or other (human) subjects express themselves as actors. Such scenes, combined with drawings (cf. 1940: 5, 7, 31, 43, 73, 85),[36] can be found in the introductions to nearly each story of the novel.

V Death, dreams and cobwebs

Uexküll's cobwebs are not only stories of storytelling subjects, but also – on the actor level – of dying subjects. These subjects die in a more or less dramatic way.

[36] Uexküll asked Huth for drawings in a letter of January 15, 1940. He received the drawings before his letter to Huth on March 2 of the same year (Uexküll archive in Tartu). In the first letter, Uexküll asked Huth to draw a 'small image' (*kleines Bild*) for each story. In the second letter, Uexküll expresses his admiration of the drawing of the first image (the garden of the summer residence on p. 7), in which the figures of the women, which are just 'vaguely indicated' (*angedeutet)*, fit within the 'harmony' (*Zusammenklang*) of the whole scene.

They are murdered, beheaded, drown or they die from a seemingly incurable illness. There are also stories in which actors try to convince other actors that they have the wrong worldviews, and that these worldviews will 'ruin' them. In Clarissa's case, these stories are related to Uexküll's general biological explanatory models. The subject-umwelt paradigm serves, as in Uexküll's *Staatsbiologie*, as a kind of a corrective or even healing discourse. However, the death of an actor is not just related to his wrong worldview. Tre Case is somehow 'cured' from Clarissa's letter about the subject-umwelt paradigm, but this is also the reason for his wish to join her – after her death.

Against a fact-and-truth oriented science, Uexküll develops, in Tre Case's story, the romantic perspective of a human existence that is not just conditioned by self-regulating and self-maintaining organic processes. He presents transcendency, completeness, harmony and belief as life-constituting inner needs that are deeply interwoven with the histories of individuals.

Uexküll emphasises on many occasions in the novel that it is the 'dream' of humans to become eternal and immortal, although they have to die for it.[37] The second part of the novel begins with Dorothea's song about a dream of eternity, and it also ends (in the last, typewritten version) with a dream. Dorothea sings the first eight lines of Johann Gottfried Herder's poem *Amor and Psyche on a Gravestone*.[38] One of the main *topoi* of Herder's poem is the drive of Amor and Psyche to remain in the 'eternal moment' (*ewigen Augenblick*) of the 'kiss of love', although they have to die for it (cf. Herder 1879, Vol. 1, 115–116).[39] The eternal 'rhythm of the protoplasm that recreates every umwelt from moment to moment', the rhythm through which 'each subject returns in its death from Becoming to Being' (1930: 158–159), thus echoes in the romantic dream of human subjects to unify themselves with the Other that is made for them.[40] Only a 'storytelling painter', suggests Uexküll in *The Immortal Spirit of Nature*, who would sketch an image that begins from his birth deep in the background to progress to his present state in the foreground, could, in combining both scenes through an 'ideal landscape' full of labyrinths, dare, as a living being, to return from the end of his life to its beginning (1947: 95–96).

[37] When Uexküll confronts natural science with the problem of immortality, he often refers to the writings of Hermann Graf Keyserling (cf. 1910b: 238, 1910c: 648, Keyserling 1907).

[38] Uexküll does not mention the title and the author of the poem. It was written between 1759 and 1803. For the entire text, see Herder 1879, Vol. 1, 115–116.

[39] Death functions here as an exile from the world of the mortals.

[40] Dreams also serve other purposes in the novel.

For Uexküll, subjects are, as individuals, confined to their umwelt-tunnel, separated from the other through an irreducible difference. And yet all subjects long for eternity as living beings that are made for each other in the contrapuntal composition of nature. Cobwebs and landscapes represent the 'worlds' that they experienced, which they produce in progressing to a seemingly open end of many choices. However, they will always find themselves as subjects of umwelten, in which they are enclosed. Storytelling spiders cannot disappear from the centre of their webs.[41]

The death and the dreams of actors are related to the notion of fate. Fate results, for Uexküll, from the fact that every individual is 'put into nature' (*in die Natur hineinversetzt*, 1940: 82). The individual then has to exist for a certain time and in certain places between its birth and its death. Life and death thus form the 'frame' (*Rahmen*) of its existential conditions. In this perspective, one could interpret Uexküll's notion of fate as the totality of events and conditions that form this 'frame'. But 'fate' is more for Uexküll. As is true for the Norns in Nordic myths, Louise often appears as a goddess of destiny who sees the different threads of the web of individual fates (which have already been knit). In the fates of the subjects, foreseen by Louise, their deaths project into their lives.

The fact of the necessary deaths of individuals thus plays an important, although ambiguous, role in the 'objective reality' that is 'created' (*geschaffen*) by subjects (1926: 235). However, the subject that 'supplies' (*liefert*) the 'inner trestle' or 'framework' (*Gerüst*) of its world through perceptions and actions (cf. 1926: 233) is itself in a continuous process of recurrent appropriations of its world. Storytelling subjects reconstruct and recreate their experiences. Through these re-constructions, they question their former appropriation of the world and re-appropriate it. However, each re-appropriation through a story that already 'exists' in the storytelling subject also involves a thematic re-constellation and the response of subjects to which the story is told. Both the thematic re-constellation (as the stories that 'rank' around the Stone of Werder) and the response of the subjects to which the story is told, produce new perspectives on the 'same' story.

[41] The drawings of cobwebs always represent the webs of cross spiders with a central, single reference point (cf. 1950: 120–121. In *The Immortal Spirit of Nature* (*Der unsterbliche Geist in der Natur*), Uexküll discusses three possible types of 'thought webs' (*Denkgewebe*): 'If we consider the structure of the world [*Weltgefüge*] as a thought web, such a web can have multiple fixed reference points, in which the threads meet, or just one, or finally not a single one, because all threads intercross without rules [*regellos*].' (1947: 23.)

Cobweb stories result from re-appropriations of 'worlds' in a hermeneutic process that is based on the subject-umwelt paradigm. They seem to be characteristic of just those subjects that appear as storytelling actors in the novel – humans.[42]

Cobweb stories form the supporting structures of the 'inner trestle' of 'worlds'. Through them, 'worlds' appear, and it might not be by chance that all 'real' cobwebs of the novel (in the text or in the drawings) appear within openings – except for the cobweb above the Stone of Werder (1940: 13–14, 16–17, 30, 34).[43] But it is exactly this cobweb that opens the first part of the novel.

[42] For hermeneutic aspects in Uexküll's work, see also Chang 2005.

[43] Characteristic in this perspective are the drawings on pp. 13 and 31.

Conversely, cobwebs function also as fishing nets or nets of stars that hold something together or capture it. Nets of references between stories, images, metaphors, analogies and 'real' spider webs intensify the theme of the cobweb stories throughout the whole novel.[44] *The Stone of Werder* is not written about the Stone of Werder, but about the cobweb above it.

VI The new end of *The Stone of Werder*[45]

[Translation]

After a glance at my guest, it was clear to me that she had read the inscription in its entire meaning.

She looked very determined, and said: 'I will return to my school.'

The rolling of wheels and the white that was lightening up between the trees announced the approach of the light, white carriage. The moment to say good-bye had come. A hearty handshake and a 'God bless you' were the end.

The sound of the wheels died away and the island sank back into its dream.

The Stone of Werder remained untouched and showed its mysterious inscription.

[44] Uexküll might have been inspired by Jean-Henri Fabre's (1823–1915) writings on the 'worlds of insects'. Uexküll read at least parts of Fabre's *Souvenirs entomologiques* (published for the first time between 1879 and 1907, cf. 1927b: 699). From 1908 on, Kasimir Graff published German translations of extracts from *Souvenirs entomologiques*, *Mœurs des Insects* and *La vie des Insectes*. The series had the title *Bilder aus der Insektenwelt* (*Images of the Insect World*). One of the issues can still be found in the Uexküll archive of Hamburg. In 1911, a collection of essays, which were taken from Fabre's *Souvenirs entomologiques*, appeared under the title *La vie des araignées* (*The Life of Spiders*).

[45] The originally typewritten text can be found on page 119 of a copy of the novel in the Uexküll archive in Tartu. The copy was handed over to the archive by Thure von Uexküll. It is reprinted courtesy of the Uexküll archive.

Ein Blick auf meinen Gast belehrte mich, dass auch sie die Inschrift in ihrem vollen Umfang gelesen hatte.

Eine harte Entschlossenheit lag auf ihren Zügen: "Ich kehre in meine Schule zurück", sagte sie.

Das Rollen von Rädern und ein weisses Aufleuchten zwischen den Baumstämmen kündete das Nahen des leichten Schimmelgefährtes an. Die Stunde des Abschieds hatte geschlagen. Ein kräftiger Händedruck und ein treuherziges :" Vergelt s Gott" waren das Ende.

Die Räder verhallten in der Ferne und die Insel sank zurück in ihren Traum.

Der Stein von Werder stand unberührt da und zeigte seine alte rätselvolle Inschrift.-

References

Alverdes, Friedrich 1937. Die Wirksamkeit von Archetypen in den Instinkthandlungen der Tiere. – *Zoologischer Anzeiger*, no. 119, pp. 225–236

Bonnet, Charles 1760. *Essai analytique sur les facultés de l'âme*. Kopenhagen: Freres Cl. & Ant. Philibert

Chang, Han-liang 2004. Semiotician or Hermeneutician? Jakob von Uexküll Revisited. – *Sign Systems Studies*, Vol. 32, pp. 115–138

Bilz, Rudolf 1940. *Pars pro toto. Ein Beitrag zur Pathologie menschlicher Affekte und Organfunktionen. Schriftenreihe zur deutschen medizinischen Wochenzeitschrift* 5. Leipzig: Thieme

Cheung, Tobias 2004a. Die Ordnung des Organischen. Zur Begriffsgeschichte organismischer Einheit bei Charles Bonnet, Spinoza und Leibniz. – *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte*, Vol. 54, pp. 87–108

Cheung, Tobias 2004b. From protoplasm to umwelt: Plans and the technique of nature in Jakob von Uexküll's theory of organismic order. – *Sign Systems Studies*, Vol. 32, pp. 139–168

Cheung, Tobias 2005. Epigenesis in *optima forma*. Die 'Einfügung' und 'Verwicklung' des organismischen Subjekts in Jakob von Uexkülls theoretischer Biologie. – *Philosophia naturalis*, no. 42, pp. 103–126

Duchesneau, François 1998. *Les modèles du vivant de Descartes à Leibniz*. Paris: Vrin

Epiktet 1992. *Handbüchlein der Moral*. Ed. Kurt Steinmann. Stuttgart: Reclam

Fabre, Jean-Henri 1914. *Die Schmalbiene und ihr Erbfeind und andere Bilder aus der Insektenwelt*. Trans. Kasimir Graff. Stuttgart: Franck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung

Fabre, Jean-Henri 1937. *La vie des araignées*. Paris: Librairie Delagrave

Fabre, Jean-Henri 1989. *Souvenirs entomologiques: Études sur l'instinct et les mœurs des insectes*. Paris: Laffont

Herder, Johann Gottfried 1879. *Herder's Werke. Nach den besten Quellen revidirte Ausgabe.* Hrsg. Heinrich Düntzer. Berlin: Hempel

Herder, Johann Gottfried (1784–1788) 1966. *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*. Frankfurt am Main: Melzer

Keyserling, Hermann Graf 1907. *Unsterblichkeit. Eine Kritik der Beziehungen zwischen Naturgeschehen und menschlicher Vorstellungswelt*. München: Lehmann

Lassen, H. 1935. Der Umgebungsbegriff als Planbegriff. Ein Beitrag zu den erkenntnistheoretischen Grundfragen der Umweltlehre. – *Sudhoffs Archiv für Geschichte der Medizin u. der Naturwissenschaften*, no. 27, pp. 480–493

Schmidt, Jutta 1980. *Die Umweltlehre Jakob von Uexkülls in ihrer Bedeutung für die Entwicklung der vergleichenden Verhaltensforschung*. [Doctoral thesis at the Philipps-Universität Marburg.] Marburg: Görich & Weiershäuser

Uexküll, Jakob von 1910a. Mendelismus. – *Die neue Rundschau*, no. 21, pp. 1589–1596

U e x k ü l l, Jakob von 1910b. Die neuen Ziele der Biologie. – *Baltische Monatszeitschrift*, no. 4, pp. 225–239

U e x k ü l l, Jakob von 1910c. Die Umwelt. – *Die neue Rundschau*, no. 21, pp. 638–649

U e x k ü l l, Jakob von 1919. Der Organismus als Staat und der Staat als Organismus. – *Der Leuchter. Weltanschauung und Lebensgestaltung*. Darmstadt: Reichl, pp. 79–110

U e x k ü l l, Jakob von 1920a. *Biologische Briefe an eine Dame*. Berlin: Paetel

U e x k ü l l, Jakob von 1920b. Der Schäfer und das Böse. – *Von Pommerscher Scholle. Kalender für 1920*. Gütersloh: Oertelsmann, pp. 26–30

U e x k ü l l, Jakob von 1920c. *Staatsbiologie*. Berlin: Paetel

U e x k ü l l, Jakob von 1926. Gott oder Gorilla. – *Deutsche Rundschau*, no. 208, pp. 232–242

U e x k ü l l, Jakob von 1927a. Definition des Lebens und des Organismus. – *Handbuch der normalen und pathologischen Physiologie. Mit Berücksichtigung der experimentellen Pharmakologie*. Vol. 1. Eds. A. Bethe, G. von Bergmann, G. Embden, A. Ellinger. Berlin: Springer, pp. 1–25

U e x k ü l l, Jakob von 1927b. Die Einpassung. – *Handbuch der normalen und pathologischen Physiologie. Mit Berücksichtigung der experimentellen Pharmakologie*. Vol. 1. Eds. A. Bethe, G. von Bergmann, G. Embden, A. Ellinger. Berlin: Springer, pp. 693–701

U e x k ü l l, Jakob von (1920) 1928. *Theoretische Biologie*. Berlin: Springer

U e x k ü l l, Jakob von 1930. *Die Lebenslehre*. Potsdam: Müller und Kiepenheuer

U e x k ü l l, Jakob von 1931. Die Rolle des Subjekts in der Biologie. – *Die Naturwissenschaften*, no. 19, pp. 385–391

U e x k ü l l, Jakob von 1936a. *Niegeschaute Welten. Die Umwelten meiner Freunde. Ein Erinnerungsbuch*. Berlin: Fischer

U e x k ü l l, Jakob von 1936b. Biologie in der Mausefalle. – *Zeitschrift für die gesamte Naturwissenschaft*, no. 6, pp. 213–222

U e x k ü l l, Jakob von 1937. Die neue Umweltlehre: Ein Bindeglied zwischen Natur- und Kulturwissenschaften. – *Die Erziehung*, no. 13, pp. 185–199

U e x k ü l l, Jakob von 1940. *Der Stein von Werder*. Hamburg: Wegner

U e x k ü l l, Jakob von 1947. *Der unsterbliche Geist in der Natur. Gespräche*. Hamburg: Wegner

U e x k ü l l, Jakob von 1950. *Das allmächtige Leben*. Hamburg: Wegner

U e x k ü l l, Jakob von; K r i s z a t, Georg 1934. *Streifzüge durch die Umwelten von Tieren und Menschen. Ein Bilderbuch unsichtbarer Welten*. Berlin: Springer

U e x k ü l l, Jakob von; U e x k ü l l, Thure von 1944. *Die ewige Frage. Biologische Variationen über einen platonischen Dialog*. Hamburg: Schröder

V o l k e l t, Hans 1914. *Über die Vorstellungen der Tiere: Ein Beitrag zur Entwicklungspsychologie*. Leipzig: Berlin

W e i z s ä c k e r, Viktor von 1940. *Der Gestaltkreis. Theorie der Einheit von Wahrnehmen und Bewegen*. Leipzig: Thieme