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# Of Mice and Men and Aquatic Flows: Distributed Agency in Theodor Storm's *Der Schimmelreiter*

Kate Rigby

Around midnight on February 3, 1825, the North Sea rose once again, as it is had done, catastrophically, about once a century since medieval times. Whipped up by a powerful storm, compounded by a sudden wind change from the southwest to the northwest, the surging waters of high tide breached the barriers that had been extended and fortified since the last major North Sea flood of Christmas 1717. Farms, villages and towns along the coast from Belgium to Jutland were inundated, devastating hundreds of square kilometres of agricultural land and even tearing off huge chunks of peat moor, which were strewn across the ruined fields by the receding tide. Eight hundred people are believed to have died that night, along with some forty-five thousand domestic animals.<sup>1</sup> In Theodor Storm's hometown of Husum in North Frisia, according to the pillar that stands in the harbor as a memorial to this history of weather- and sea-borne disaster, the flood waters of February 1825 peaked at 5.10 meters.<sup>2</sup>

Storm was seven years old in 1825, and in her biography of her father, Gertrud Storm describes this as the first "great event" of his life.<sup>3</sup> It also made a big impression on the aging Goethe in Weimar, leading him to "look upon the elements as gigantic adversaries with whom we have to fight unceasingly, conquering them in particular cases

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<sup>1</sup> Blackbourn, *The Conquest of Nature*, 124.

<sup>2</sup> Other estimates vary between 4.62 and 5.23. Meier, "Sturmfluten."

<sup>3</sup> Holander, *Theodor Storm*, 21.

only by courage and guile and the highest energy of our spirit,” as he wrote in his “Essay on Meteorology” (1825).<sup>4</sup> This reminder of the destructive agency of the elements also precipitated his return to *Faust. Part Two*, which he had begun, but then abandoned, back in 1816.<sup>5</sup> In the final version, completed in 1831 and published posthumously the following year, Goethe’s archetypically modern tragic hero metamorphoses into a hydrological engineer, who aspires to “ban the lordly sea” (IV, 10229), and dies dreaming of the expanded living space for a new breed of human battlers against the elements that he will have created through his ambitious dyke, dam and drainage scheme. Scandalously, Mephistopheles fails to make off with his soul. But he does foreshadow the eventual ruination of Faust’s Promethean project, the price of which is shown to have fallen heavily on his hard-pressed workers, along with the native shore-dwellers, whose habitation it destroys:

And yet it’s us you’re working for  
With all your foolish dams and dikes;  
Neptune, the water-devil, likes  
To think of the great feast there’ll be  
When they collapse.<sup>6</sup>  
(V, 11544-48)

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<sup>4</sup> Goethe, *Scientific Studies*, 147.

<sup>5</sup> Luke, “Introduction,” liv.

<sup>6</sup> “Du bist doch nur für uns bemüht/Mit deinen Dämmen, deinen Bühnen;/Denn du bereitest schon Neptunen,/Dem Wasserteufel, großen Schmaus.” Goethe, *Faust. Faust. Der Tragödie Zweiter Teil*.

Storm's last work, *Der Schimmelreiter* ("The Rider on the Grey"), completed just months before he died in 1888, also features a Promethean dyke builder, whom some within the narrative take to have a similarly sinister associate. Storm was fascinated by *Faust. Part Two*, and a number of critics have identified both similarities and differences between the protagonist of his novella, the North Frisian Hauke Haien, and Goethe's archetypal modernizer.<sup>7</sup> With some variations in emphasis and interpretation, these earlier comparisons share a broadly anthropocentric, or in Erica Cudworth's more precise coinage, "anthroparchal"<sup>8</sup> agenda, according to which human reason and will are inevitably pitted against the blindly destructive forces of "nature" (along with the irrational impulses of dim-witted or unenlightened humans).<sup>9</sup> When reconsidered from an ecocritical perspective, however, the Faustian echoes in Storm's text acquire a very different salience. Taking my cue from Heather Sullivan's ecocritical reading of Goethe's drama, I interpret Storm's protagonist as Faustian in the sense that he too falls prey, not so much to the violence of the elements or the backwardness of his compatriots, but to the characteristically modern anthroparchal illusion of unidirectional self-determined human agency.

Sullivan's re-interpretation of *Faust* is facilitated by "affinity studies," which resituate human agency within "a complex entanglement of cultural and physical

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<sup>7</sup> E.g. Moritz Necker, review of *Der Schimmelreiter* in *Die Grenzboten* (No. 48, 1889), in Storm, *Werke*, 1086-88; Silz, "Theodor Storm's *Schimmelreiter*"; Loeb, "Faust ohne Transzendenz"; Demandt, *Religion*, 185-248.

<sup>8</sup> Within Cudworth's ecofeminist elaboration of Niklas Luhmann's Systems Theory, "anthroparchy" refers to social systems of human domination of other living beings and the environment. Cudworth, *Developing Ecofeminist Theory*.

<sup>9</sup> Thus, e.g. Loeb (echoing Walter Silz): "In Wahrheit wird er [Hauke] nicht eigentlich zwei Feinde haben, sondern nur *einen*: Ist doch der irrationale, stumpf-kreatürliche Unverstand nur die in die menschliche Sphäre übertragene Kehrseite der elementaren, widervernünftigen Dämonie der Naturgewalten." "Faust ohne Transzendenz," 125.

patterns, or as part of flows between ‘open systems.’”<sup>10</sup> On this open systems understanding, no entities stand alone and unconditioned, no actions are entirely free, and no events monocausal. All things, including human subjects, are formed and transformed through their dynamic interrelations with other things, and their agency is always “distributed,” as Peter Taylor puts it, emerging “within the interpersonal, cultural and natural flows around it”.<sup>11</sup> Affinity studies comprise one of a number of “new materialisms” informing current developments within ecocritical theory.<sup>12</sup> What is “new” in this materialist turn, is firstly, relative to the idealist tendencies of the radical cultural constructivism that gained ascendancy with the “linguistic turn” taken by the humanities (especially literary and cultural theory) in the 1970s; secondly, it expands what are taken to be salient enabling conditions and co-determinants of human socio-cultural life beyond the still distinctly human-centred confines of the “economic base” of historical materialism to encompass diverse bio-physical phenomena, as disclosed by the sciences and science studies; and thirdly, it reconceptualises those bio-physical entities and processes in ways that run counter to earlier, reductively mechanistic views of materiality, by emphasising the dynamically interactive, agential, communicative, and, in some cases, ethically considerable dimensions of the diverse other-than-human things and more-than-human relationships that variously facilitate, constrain and (de-)compose human existence, both individually and collectively. As Coole and Frost observe:

materiality is always something more than ‘mere’ matter: an excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference that renders matter active, self-creative,

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<sup>10</sup> Sullivan, “Affinity Studies,” 241.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 245. Taylor, “Distributed Agency.”

<sup>12</sup> See e.g. Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms*.

productive, unpredictable. In sum, new materialists are discovering a materiality that materializes, evincing immanent modes of self-transformation that compel us to think of causation in far more complex terms; to recognize that phenomena are caught in a multitude of interlocking systems and forces and to consider anew the location and nature of capacities for agency.<sup>13</sup>

Sullivan's reading of Goethe's *Faust* exemplifies the assimilation of such new materialist concerns and concepts to the field of ecocriticism in an approach that Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann have termed "material ecocriticism."<sup>14</sup> Attending to the triple framing of the dramatic action of Goethe's two-part play, along with its poetic imagery of interweaving flows, Sullivan reinterprets *Faust* as "questioning rather than exemplifying human control over nature-culture."<sup>15</sup> From this perspective, the dyke becomes legible as "a metaphor for the Faustian consciousness that blindly sees its own agency but not its inevitable affinities and 'enabling conditions,' and thus believes that it can close the open systems of flow."<sup>16</sup> In my analysis, Hauke Haien's story, as it emerges through the conflicting viewpoints of Storm's tripartite narrative frame, also discloses the pitfalls of the Faustian bid for individualistic human control. Moving beyond the point at which *Faust. Part Two* concludes, namely to the disastrous return of the sea as prefigured by Mephistopheles, this text also reveals the complex entanglement of diverse human and nonhuman agencies in the unfolding of the catastrophic flood with which it culminates. This is a story that raises increasingly urgent questions about human interactions and, as

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<sup>13</sup> Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms*, 9.

<sup>14</sup> Iovino and Oppermann, *Material Ecocriticism*. See also Sullivan and Phillips, Material Ecocritical cluster.

<sup>15</sup> Sullivan, "Affinity Studies," 241.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

Karen Barad puts it, “intra-actions,”<sup>17</sup> with those elemental forces that have only been rendered more unruly by the project of technological mastery that was intended to keep them at bay. By contrast with Faust’s epic drama, no horizon of transcendence opens at the end of Storm’s tragic novella.<sup>18</sup> An alternative to the Faustian project is nonetheless implicit within this text: one that opens the prospect of a post-anthroparchal pathway towards a different, more ecological, modernity.<sup>19</sup> This reading, which is informed by earlier German Critical Theory as well as by current new materialist thinking, aligns with the ecological posthumanist challenge to human exceptionalism and supremacism; however, in endorsing the human capacity for critical self-reflection and moral reasoning, it also moves towards a renovated, post-anthroparchal humanism.

*Der Schimmelreiter* is set on the West coast of Schleswig and the topography of the novella conforms closely to that of Storm’s natal region of North Frisia.<sup>20</sup> This hybrid landscape has been shaped and reshaped many times over in an open-ended and decentred process of geo-cultural becoming, exemplifying what Andrew Pickering calls the “dance of agency.”<sup>21</sup> The story goes something like this: the favourable, if highly labile, environmental conditions that attracted human settlers to the Frisian salt marshes—gatherer-hunters, then herders, salt harvesters, peat-cutters and later farmers—were created by a dynamic interplay of oceanic, climatic, geological and biotic factors. The terrestrial changes introduced by those who laid claim to the land altered the impacts

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<sup>17</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe*. Intra-actions are interactions that are mutually constitutive.

<sup>18</sup> In his unpublished preface for the 1881 publication of his collected works, Storm describes the novella as the “sister of drama.” Qtd. in Fasold, *Theodor Storm*, 121. For a detailed analysis of the tragic dramatic structure of *Der Schimmelreiter* see Demandt, *Religion*, 185-248.

<sup>19</sup> This interpretation follows on from my discussion of Storm and ecological modernity in Rigby, “(K)ein Klang der aufgeregten Zeit?”

<sup>20</sup> Storm, *Dykemaster*, 10-11. Hereafter cited in the body of the article as D.

<sup>21</sup> Pickering coined this expression in *The Mangle of Practice*, and has since elaborated it further in “New Ontologies.”

of sea and storm in ways that called forth further human interventions, which in turn impacted upon social relations. Prior to human settlement, the coastline had morphed dramatically over the millennia as a consequence of rising and falling sea levels, while frequent smaller changes were effected by winter storm surges. The southern North Sea coast is particularly susceptible to wind changes from the south or southwest to the northwest, causing a confluence of the currents that had been forced up into the North Sea from the English Channel with those that were now being forced south from the North Sea between Scotland and Norway.<sup>22</sup> Prior to the eleventh century, peasant farmers in North Frisia built their dwellings on small knolls (*Wurten* or *Warften*), accommodating themselves to regular flooding in exchange for the nutrients that the sea left in the soil. By the early Middle Ages, some were extending the amount of land under cultivation by the construction of summer dykes that were dismantled after the harvest. However, with the development of permanent dykes, this dance of people, plants, animals, wind and sea changed its character significantly. By the thirteenth century, the “golden ring” that surrounded the Frisian marshes ensured that “the flood waters, instead of spreading out a few inches deep over the marshland behind the tidal mudflats, built up against the dykes and battered at them, giving rise to the familiar image of the angry, growling sea.”<sup>23</sup> This also engendered greater stratification, as rich farmers, whose family wealth was based on the drainage and colonization of landward marshes and bogs, joined with other men of high social standing (town merchants and professionals) to take charge of dyke building and maintenance, while impoverished or displaced peasants joined the ranks of their paid

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<sup>22</sup> Holander, *Theodor Storm*, 73.

<sup>23</sup> Blackbourn, *Conquest of Nature*, 122.



labourers.<sup>24</sup> The dykes demanded continuous attention, and during times of war, famine or plague, they were commonly neglected, making them more susceptible to failure. Meanwhile, as the drained marshes dried and peat was cut from the moors, the land shrank and sank, resituating the dyked fields below sea level. In seeking to extend and fortify their settlements against the sea, the North Frisians had in effect made themselves and their domestic animals more vulnerable to major disaster, as light to moderate more-or-less annual flooding was replaced by a catastrophic deluge around once a century.

The first recorded of these “floods of the century” occurred in 1164, and it was followed, up until 1825, by those of 1287, 1334, 1362, 1511, 1570, 1634, and 1717. The Christmas 1717 storm surge, followed by further flooding in 1718 and 1720, remains the worst on record in terms of fatalities, claiming the lives of around eleven thousand people and some ninety-five thousand domestic animals.<sup>25</sup> There was also a significant flood event in 1756, the historical referent for the disaster narrativized in *Der Schimmelreiter*, and Storm himself again experienced major flooding in 1855. There has been a run of big floods in the twentieth century, with the highest water level yet recorded in Husum peaking at 5.66 meters in 1976. Higher, stronger dykes and tidal barriers, in conjunction with more reliable forecasting of extremes, have reduced fatalities. Whether and for how long these techno-scientific improvements can keep pace with today’s anthropogenically rising sea levels and more frequent and intense extremes remains to be seen. But beyond a certain point, dykes can be built no higher without destabilizing the very ground upon which this increasingly dicey dance of distributed

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<sup>24</sup> Meier, “Man and Environment,” 65-66, and Blackbourn, *The Conquest of Nature*, 123.

<sup>25</sup> Meier, “Sturmfluten”. Blackbourn cites somewhat lower figures: nine thousand and sixty-thousand, respectively (*Conquest of Nature*, 124), whereas Manfred Jakubowski-Tiessen also refers to eleven thousand human fatalities in “Gotteszorn und Meereswüten,” 101.

agency has played out over the past millennium.<sup>26</sup> At this critical juncture, then, it appears advisable to question the older humanist assumptions that underpin a project of technological mastery and economic exploitation that has effectively generated new kinds of human (and, as collateral damage, other-than-human) vulnerability to the elemental forces of an anthropogenically altered Earth and Sky.

The control of water was integral to the making of modern Germany, and Storm's fictitious dyke-builder, like Faust before him, is exemplary of the quest for aquatic mastery that got underway around the middle of the eighteenth century. While the technical innovation that Storm attributes to his protagonist—the construction of a more gently sloping seaward side to reduce water pressure and hence erosion—was actually developed in the Netherlands in the early sixteenth century, it had not yet been widely adopted in Schleswig at the time when Hauke Haien's story is set. After 1750, the hydrological projects that were undertaken throughout the German region were far larger, with correspondingly greater impacts, and oriented towards enhancing the wealth and power of territorial states. Chief among these was Prussia under Frederick the Great, who “drained more marshland and fen than any other ruler of the time.”<sup>27</sup> In Schleswig, following the catastrophic 1717-1720 floods, coastal protection was unified under the authority of the state, in accordance with the principles laid out in his *Anfangsgründe der Deich und Wasser-Baukunst* (Principles of Dyke and Aquatic Engineering, 1754-57) by Albert Brahms (1692-1758), a dykegrave on the Frisian Wadden Sea and a pioneer of modern German coastal engineering, who advocated the building of dykes with a convex

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<sup>26</sup> “Sturmflut” in Gesellschaft für Schleswig-Holsteinische Geschichte, “Schleswig-Holstein von A bis Z“, <http://www.geschichte-s-h.de/vonabisz/sturmflut.htm> (accessed January 20, 2012).

<sup>27</sup> Blackbourn, *Conquest of Nature*, 3.

shape on both the landward and seaward side.<sup>28</sup> These administrative and technical innovations helped reduce the death toll on the mainland during the 1825 storm surge, when floodwaters actually peaked higher, but claimed far fewer lives, than they had in 1717. In North Frisia, the leading dyke builder of the mid 1700s was Jean Henri Desmercieres (1687-1778), who created several new “polders” (*Kooge*)—areas of fertile marshland reclaimed from the sea—using the improved sloping-sided dyke design. Desmercieres’ dyke-building enterprise was one of the likely models for Hauke Haien’s, but whereas Storm’s protagonist is a resident farmer, his historical counterpart was a capitalist entrepreneur: a director of the Royal Bank in Copenhagen, Desmercieres acquired permits from the Crown to finance the building of new dykes by paid labourers, in order to then sell off parcels of the newly acquired land at a tidy profit, part of which returned to the Crown in taxes. Throughout the 1700s, there were also repeated—and, significantly for my reading of *Der Schimmelreiter*, expensive and unsuccessful—attempts to dam the *Königstief*, the deepest and most dangerous of three watercourses that flowed across the “New Koog” on the Hattstedter Marsh near Husum. From the early nineteenth century, measures to control inland waters and drain marshland also intensified.<sup>29</sup>

The practice of ever more intensive and extensive damming, dyking and drainage created an increasingly sharp divide between sea and land, watery waste and cultivated soil, in place of what had once been a natural-cultural amphibious zone, where the wild and the domesticated, fresh and saltwater, human and nonhuman agencies, had previously intermingled promiscuously (if not always harmoniously). This material division

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<sup>28</sup> Meier, “Sturmfluten”; Niemeyer, Eiben and Rohde, “History and Heritage,” 7.

<sup>29</sup> Holander, *Theodor Storm*, 75-80.

rendered palpable, and thereby reinforced, a long-standing nature-culture dualism within European thought. This binary was also in the process of becoming entrenched as the organising principle of the modern system of knowledge, severing the ‘natural’ from the ‘human’ or ‘mental’/‘spiritual’ sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*), under what Michel Serres has termed the “Modern Constitution”.<sup>30</sup> By the time Storm wrote *Der Schimmelreiter*, this onto-epistemological bifurcation had contributed to a further discursive divide: namely, between disasters wrought by ‘nature’ and those caused by ‘man’. The former had of course previously been attributed, in one way or another, to divine agency, frequently punitive, in response to human wrong-doing. While naturalistic interpretations of extreme events, such as earthquakes, volcanoes, droughts and floods, had also existed since antiquity, it was only in the wake of the massive quake that destroyed the city of Lisbon in 1755, and in association with the development of the natural sciences, that mythico-religious understandings of such calamities began to be more widely challenged. Contemporary constructions of the Lisbon catastrophe were extremely varied, however, and it was not until the mid to late nineteenth century that the concept of ‘natural disaster’ started to gain ground.<sup>31</sup>

In his historical reconstruction of changing interpretations of North Sea storm surges from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, Jakubowski-Tiessen identifies the 1825 flood as a turning point in this development. For participants in the Protestant revivalist movement, it provided the occasion for a reactionary reassertion of the biblical paradigm of divine punishment: a view occasionally still voiced today by monotheistic fundamentalists, and represented in Storm’s novella by the members of the local tailor’s

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<sup>30</sup> Serres, *Natural Contract*, 31-2.

<sup>31</sup> Groh, Kampe, and Mauelshagen, *Naturkatastrophen*, 11-33.

revivalist conventicle. This perspective was opposed by more mainstream Christians on physico-theological grounds, according to which such events were not attributed directly to divine intervention, but seen as a function of the natural world that God had enabled to come into being, and doubtless served some ultimately good purpose that was as yet veiled to us. However, the increasingly widespread view was that which found expression in phrases such as the “fury of nature,” “raging battle of the elements,” and, more soberly, “natural occurrence of flood.”<sup>32</sup> The shift that Jakubowski-Tiessen traces, namely towards an identification of the unruly elements as the sole agent of destruction, is consistent with Blackburn’s findings for the German region as a whole, in which an anthropogenically-altered environment is misrecognized as primal Nature and cast “as an adversary to be manacled, tamed, subjugated, conquered.”<sup>33</sup> It is this dominological view that both informs Hauke Haien’s engineering scheme and is subtly challenged by other voices within the complex narrative weave of Storm’s multivalent text.

Storm’s last novella is also his best-known, both within and beyond the German-speaking region. It was enthusiastically received at the time of publication and has since generated a considerable body of secondary literature, along with over forty translations and at least three film versions.<sup>34</sup> *Der Schimmelreiter* also rates a mention in Blackburn’s *Conquest of Nature*, where it is said to relate the “the heroic efforts of Haike Hauen [sic.] to preserve a dyke in the face of selfishness and indifference, efforts which eventually cost him his life.” Blackburn adds that “[m]ore than a trace of the heroic tone, mixed with pride in the latest technology, has found its way into the modern literature on coastal defences and the need for vigilance against the threat of natural

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<sup>32</sup> Jakubowski-Tiessen, “Gotteszorn und Meeresflüthen,” 115-18.

<sup>33</sup> Blackburn, *Conquest of Nature*, 3.

<sup>34</sup> Karl Ernst Laage, editorial commentary on *Der Schimmelreiter*, in Storm, *Werke*, 1088.

disaster from the sea.”<sup>35</sup> Blackburn evidently assumes that the implied reader of this text is meant to applaud the protagonist’s dyke-building prowess. Indeed, this was the dominant reading of the novella for at least a century, and not just among literary critics: on June 10<sup>th</sup>, 1961, the Minister President of Schleswig-Holstein announced that his government had acceded to popular pressure to name a newly created polder below the North Frisian town of Bongsiel the “Hauke Haien Koog,” in recognition that Storm’s fictional hero embodied nothing less than the “poetic ideal of the work of dyke-construction.”<sup>36</sup> By the mid-1960s, however, more equivocal views were beginning to be voiced, at least among scholars such as Jost Hermand, who reinterpreted Storm’s novella as at once a product and critique of the ideology of the ruthless *Übermensch* current in late 19<sup>th</sup>-century imperial Germany.<sup>37</sup> Other, more fine-grained investigations have followed, indicative of the ambivalent perspective on the protagonist that emerges from a close reading of the novella in hermeneutic horizons less favourable to the figure of the Faustian moderniser.<sup>38</sup> The unconditionally positive view of Hauke Haien nonetheless persists. In his Afterword to Denis Jackson’s 1996 English translation, for example, David A. Jackson celebrates Storm’s dyke-builder as “a true humanitarian hero,” who “forms a trinity with Socrates and Jesus Christ as a searcher after truth.” Like the latter, moreover, he not only dies as a martyr for his cause, but also suffers the indignity of being “turned into a ghost” by those who fail to recognize the humanitarian significance of his legacy.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Blackburn, *Conquest of Nature*, 121.

<sup>36</sup> Holunder, *Theodor Storm*, 11.

<sup>37</sup> Hermand, “Hauke Haien.”

<sup>38</sup> See e.g. Segeberg, *Literarische Technik-Bilder*, 55-106; Fasold, *Theodor Storm*, 152-67; Demandt, *Religion und Religionskritik*, 185-248.

<sup>39</sup> Jackson, “Afterword,” 149, 155.

In likening Hauke to Socrates and Christ, Jackson endorses the view of the fictional narrator, a wizened schoolmaster, who recounts Hauke's story to the journalist whose article is subsequently recalled and retold by the second frame narrator. While Jackson discerns some ambivalence towards Hauke on the part of the schoolmaster, he endorses this narrator's generally sympathetic view of the protagonist as a progressive enlightened humanist. This perspective presumably also motivates Denis Jackson's decision to entitle his translation "The Dykemaster": for it is in the schoolmaster's eyes that Hauke is to be remembered first and foremost as that, namely, not only as a noteworthy Dykegrave of his day, but one whose engineering genius made him a master of the whole dyking enterprise, embodying the triumph of human reason over the destructive forces of nature. This interpretive choice is a dubious one, in my view, as it elides the profound uncertainty surrounding the protagonist that is generated by the complex narrative structure of the text and implicit in the German title.

This is, to begin with, a case of the unreliable narrator, amplified to the power of three: the schoolmaster admits that he has a particular take on the tale, and that he has cobbled it together out of other peoples' accounts, privileging those of "rational people" (D 65) but incorporating also aspects of the "superstitious" version of the story, of which he strongly disapproves, along with details, such as Hauke's train of thought in deciding to build his new dyke, to which there were no witnesses and which must therefore be highly speculative. The schoolmaster's story is recounted in an article published in the 1830s by a journalist whose first-person narrative begins with a description of his encounter with a mysterious horseman as he rode along a North Frisian dyke one afternoon in October, in "fierce weather" (D 13). Reporting this eerie encounter to a

gathering of the local dyke committee in the inn where he has taken refuge, he learns that this must have been the ghost of Hauke Haien, who haunts the dyke when a new breach threatens, plunging into the breach pond that was formed at the place where he and his horse had died in the great flood of the previous century. The current dykemaster directs the journalist to the schoolmaster to hear the whole story, while remarking that his old housekeeper, Antje Vollmer, would tell it very differently. Her version is suppressed, but the article implies that it should not be too lightly dismissed, as the schoolmaster's narration is subsequently interrupted by two further sightings of the ghostly rider by various members of the dyke committee. This article, moreover, is being recounted by another first-person narrator, writing in the 1880s, who claims that he had never forgotten it, even though he had read it fifty years earlier. Unless he was blessed with a photographic memory, we have to assume that this too is a re-telling, presumably with its own slant: "I cannot guarantee the truth of the following account," he cautions, "nor could I vouch for the details should anyone wish to dispute them." (D13) The only thing we learn about this frame narrator is that he still shudders when he recalls his over eighty year old great-grandmother's hand caressing his hair as he read the article. This unpleasant detail has remained oddly unremarked in most of the secondary literature. But this reader, for one, is inclined to wonder how the second frame narrator's revulsion towards his great-grandmother's tender touch might colour his remembrance of the old women who figure in the article—Antje Vollmer in the first frame narrative, and the decidedly witchy Trin' Jans within the story of Hauke Haien—possibly compounding the schoolmaster's marginalisation of their stories and perspectives.



The uncertainty surrounding the identity of the protagonist and the interpretation of his life story is implicit in the German title. As “The Rider on the Grey,” Hauke is both the malign ghost of Antje Vollmer’s version and the enlightened dyke-builder of the schoolmaster’s. In the former account, only glimpsed indirectly, he is a sinister figure, whose horse is said to have been acquired from a gypsy with a claw-like hand who laughed “like the devil” as Hauke led him away (D 72). According to the stable boy, this purchase coincided with the disappearance of the mysterious skeletal remains and ghostly apparition of a horse that he and the farmhand Carsten had seen on Jevershallig, one of the small un-dyked islands close to the mainland; and, according to North Frisian folklore, the devil (and, before him, the Norse God Odin) rides a grey. In the schoolmaster’s account, by contrast, this demonic transaction reads more like an animal rescue operation: the horse, as Hauke points out to his “prudent wife,” who is worried about the expense, had been “starved and ill-treated” (D 70), and is skinny, dull-eyed and lame. Once he has been nurtured back to good health, moreover, the grey, whom only Hauke can handle and who becomes “at one” with his rider (D 73), is enlisted in the dykemaster’s construction scheme, becoming an ally in his control over men in the service of his containment of the watery deep:

Appointed foremen walked up and down, and when it blew a gale they stood with wide-open mouths hollering their orders into the wind and weather; among them rode the dykemaster on his grey, which he now rode all the time, and the animal flew to and fro with its rider as he swiftly and coldly rapped out his orders,

praised the workmen, or, as happened from time to time, dismissed a lazy or clumsy worker without mercy. (D 80)

What the schoolmaster's tale lets slip here is the inter-structuration of the domination of nature with certain forms of social oppression, as discerned by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and since explored further by an array of ecological socialist, feminist and postcolonial theorists.<sup>40</sup> In their critique of capitalist modernization, Adorno and Horkheimer also highlight the psycho-sexually repressive dimension of this dominological endeavor, notably in the guise of the Puritan work ethic, which, as Max Weber had previously demonstrated, proved so conducive to the "spirit of capitalism."<sup>41</sup> Hauke has this in abundance: as dykemaster, his life of "unremitting toil" (D 59), motivated by a murky mix of service and ambition, meant that Elke's efforts in the early years of their marriage to stay awake until he joined her in bed went unrewarded, and they remained childless for many years. Hauke's rational self-mastery is also hinted at in his designation as the "rider on the grey": namely, in the echo of Socrates' metaphorical charioteer in Plato's *Phaedrus*, tasked with reining in the horse of carnal passion and forcing it to walk in step with that of moral impulse.<sup>42</sup>

Rather than obliging the reader to accept either of these contrasting takes on the tale, and the opposing onto-epistemologies from which they emerge, the double framing of Storm's narrative opens up the possibility that neither Antje Vollmer nor the

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<sup>40</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. See also Plumwood, *Feminism*, for a critique of the "logic of colonisation" that integrates socialist, feminist and postcolonial perspectives.

<sup>41</sup> Weber, *Protestant Ethic*.

<sup>42</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246a-254e. In *Feminism* (87-90), Plumwood reads this metaphor as exemplary of the reason/nature hierarchical dualism that structures the prevailing "logic of colonisation" within Western culture.

schoolmaster are in possession of the truth of the matter. The postmodern constructivist conclusion response to this ambivalence is that this highly self-reflexive, though ostensibly ‘realist’ text is not actually concerned with ‘reality’ at all, but solely with the practice of narration itself.<sup>43</sup> While I agree that this is, importantly, a story about storytelling, what it discloses, in my reading, is that reality certainly matters, but that there is more to mattering than meets the eye; more than has as yet been explained by science; and more, perhaps, than can ever be revealed by its methods or captured by human sign systems, whether mathematical or verbal.<sup>44</sup> Epistemologically elusive though they might be, material realities are nonetheless also shown to be powerfully agential, with a proclivity for interrupting human ideations and undertakings. To attend to this dimension of the text is to discern the lineaments of a third take on the tale: one that is neither mythic nor rationalist but post-modern and post-humanist, in an ecologically-oriented new materialist vein.

Among the many non-human entities that figure in this narrative, a variety of animals play a significant, and hitherto insufficiently regarded, role. The more-than-human character of the collective that inhabits the coastal region memorialized in *Der Schimmelreiter* is established in the opening of the journalist’s tale in his description of the “crows and gulls, which, constantly cawing and cackling, were being driven inland by the storm” (D 13-14)—a reminder that nonhumans too must contend with the unruly elements. These bird calls are echoed in the schoolmaster’s description of Hauke’s last ride along this same dyke in the tempest with which his story concludes. But whereas in

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<sup>43</sup> Meier, “‘Wie kommt ein Pferd.’”

<sup>44</sup> As Demandt has demonstrated, this view is probably a closer approximation to Storm’s own perspective than that of either the rationalistic schoolmaster or the postmodern ironist. E.g. Storm considered the possibility that there was an as yet unidentified material basis for the phenomenon of ghosts. *Religion*, 203-205.

the frame narrative the encounter between birds and rider is tender, as the low-flying birds' long wings "almost brushed" the journalist and his "trusty mare" (D 14), in the schoolmaster's tale, Hauke's powerful stallion crushes a gull under its pounding hooves. Identifying the victim as Claus, the bird who had become one of his intellectually disabled daughter's animal companions, Hauke expresses pity for the tame creature who had found death where it had presumably sought shelter. This contrasts with the journalist's fellow feeling for the wild birds he encounters, with whom he had "every sympathy" (13).<sup>45</sup> It also stands in stark contrast to the utter disdain displayed by the teenage Hauke, who, during his long solitary hours on the old dyke, "heard neither the splashing of the water nor the cries of the shore birds and seagulls which flew around or above him and nearly brushed him with their wings, their dark eyes flashing into his" (D 19). In his mental preoccupation with the problem of improved protection against the sea, Hauke ignores the sensory perceptions that might have revealed the birds to him as fellow creatures. Declining to meet their gaze, he denies also their ethical considerability, and takes to honing his throwing skills by killing "little grey sandpipers" with stones hurled from the dyke as they "called and scurried across" the mudflats (24). As there is no indication that the birds supplied food for Hauke and his widowed father, as they did for Trin' Jans' old Angora tomcat, to whom he was in the habit of tossing one of his catch on the way home, the reader is left to assume that this was an act of wanton and perhaps sadistic violence. Moreover, having on one occasion scored something more beautiful and exotic, possibly a kingfisher, he breaks his deal with the cat. When the tom

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<sup>45</sup> In the German original, however, this sympathy is articulated in a somewhat more qualified way: "ich verdachte es nicht den Krähen und Möwen, die sich fortwährend krächzend und gackernd vom Sturm ins Land hineintreiben ließen." Storm, *Werke*, 635.

endeavours to take by stealth what he had come to consider his by right, Hauke becomes infuriated and remorselessly strangles him.

Neither the schoolmaster nor many, if any, of Storm's interpreters appear to consider Hauke's non-human victims worthy of consideration in their own right. In good Kantian fashion, the killing of the cat is only acknowledged as wrongful because of the indirect harm caused its human owner: the old Angora, we are told, was Trin' Jans' "pride and joy [...] her sole companion and the only thing that her son, a seaman, had left her after meeting with sudden death on this coast" (25). In her dismay, the old woman curses Hauke. This curse would no doubt be considered portentous within the mythic account of the tale, and Trin' herself observes on the birth of his defective daughter that he is being punished, although what for exactly remains unclear. As narrated by the schoolmaster, however, the primary interest of this episode is psychological: his father is said to have agreed with Hauke's own analysis that this violent outburst could be put down to pent up adolescent frustration, for which the solution is meaningful employment. In killing a fellow predator in a fit of "rage like a wild beast's" (24), so this story goes, Hauke is forced to confront his own aggressive instincts, which are thenceforth to be sublimated in the labors that he now embarks upon: firstly as the old dykemaster's farmhand, then his accountant, and finally, having married his daughter and thereby acquired sufficient property to qualify, as the new dykemaster.

To be fair, the casual cruelty of the adolescent is replaced by a more compassionate attitude in the adult dykemaster, who also displays an unconventionally immanent view of the divine. Hauke had worked out his own enlightened understanding of religion, in which God is taken to be omnipresent, but no longer

omnipotent (nor, in this pessimistically Schopenhauerian version of physico-theology, particularly comforting). In seeking to dispel his daughter's fear of the mythic "sea devils" of whom she had heard in the tales of Trin' Jans (whom Elke had installed the Haien barn, along with her gull and a footstool made of her old cat's coat), Hauke insists that the figures she can glimpse from his new dyke are "just poor hungry birds [...] catching the fish which come up in those waters when the mist is clearing [...] they're all living creatures, just as we are; there is nothing else; but God is everywhere." (D 99) The mythic worldview, meanwhile, is shown to lack an ethical regard for individuals of any species, prioritizing instead the survival needs of the human collective. The men working on Hauke's dyke might be happy to share their lunch with the scavenging gulls; but Hauke has to intervene to prevent them from burying a puppy in the dyke wall as a living sacrifice, in accordance with local tradition. Declaring that he "won't have any such crime [or sacrilege: *Frevel*] on this dyke" (D 88; *Werke*, 721), Hauke risks further antagonising his workers by rescuing the cute "little golden-haired dog" (D 88) and taking it home to his daughter, Wienke, as a pet.

While this enlightened intervention is clearly presented as an ethical advance, Storm's text also reveals what stands to be lost in the course of the dykemaster's modernization drive. Morally objectionable and dubiously efficacious though it might be, the practice of animal sacrifice bears the trace of an archaic, pre-Christian ethos of reciprocity with the non-human world, according to which a return must be made for what is taken: in this case, land from the sea through the construction of a dyke. It is, of course, entirely unjust that, in accordance with the mythic logic of symbolic substitution, it is another living creature who should be made to pay the price: "A child's best of all;

but when there's none to be had, a dog will do!" as one of the workmen tells Hauke "with an impudent laugh" (D 89). Nonetheless, the dykemaster's modernist assumption that land is there for the taking as a mere resource for human use—an assumption that owes much to the lingering legacy of the biblical notion of human dominion<sup>46</sup>—is also profoundly problematic. With the disenchantment of nature, the sea no longer needs to be propitiated, having been redefined as so much meaningless matter to be exploited for its edible and tradable resources, and otherwise kept in check technologically. Forms of symbolic exchange, such as ritual sacrifice, are banished in the passage to modernity; but, as Adorno and Horkheimer emphasize, enlightened rationality now presides over the ongoing sacrifice of animals in the service of exclusively human interests in a new, desacralized guise, notably in research laboratories.<sup>47</sup>

The survival needs of nonhuman species are also regularly sacrificed to the cause of modernization through the destruction of wildlife habitat, as was the case with the massive expansion of water control projects designed to bring ever more land under cultivation in the German region from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. In this connection, it is significant that the slaughtered bird that Hauke seeks to keep from the cat is identified as possibly a kingfisher, as this beautiful and once sacred species was (and remains) vulnerable to the destruction of wetlands and natural river systems. The ecological cost of

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<sup>46</sup> "God blessed them [humans, made in God's image], and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'" Gen. 1.28, *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 12. The classic critique of the dominant Western Christian reading of this passage is Lynn White Jr.'s 1967 article, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." While much biblical scholarship has revealed the range of different interpretations that can, and have, been brought to it, White's overall argument that, beginning in the Middle Ages and crystallising during the Scientific Revolution, this passage came to be widely interpreted within Western Christian culture as licensing human domination over what modernity would define as "natural resources" holds good, in my view.

<sup>47</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic*, 9-10.

the modern regime of “discipline and drain,” as Rod Giblett puts it,<sup>48</sup> was a matter of considerable concern to some of Storm’s contemporaries. According to Blackbourn, “[b]ird protection societies were formed earlier [in Germany] than in most other countries and enjoyed huge support [...] Germany made a pioneering contribution to modern ecological ideas; and it was the study of aquatic species and habitats that propelled much of the new thinking.”<sup>49</sup> Hauke might no longer be taking pot shots at the shorebirds; but the project that he undertakes as dykemaster instantiates a model of technocratic and anthroparchal modernization that will prove devastating for many species of wildlife.

Also characteristically modern is the form of pet ownership that Hauke inaugurates within his family. Unlike Trin’ Jans’ familiars, who retain a greater degree of independent agency, while performing certain services for their human benefactor (such as killing rodents and keeping her warm at night), the bourgeois pet functions as little more than “a servile toy [...] lacking both autonomy and mystery, often conceived in humanised terms as a childlike or inferior self”.<sup>50</sup> In *Der Schimmelreiter*, pets are also shown to pay for their privilege by sharing in their masters’ vulnerability to the unintended consequences of the attempted domination of nature. As already noted, Claus, formerly Trin’s familiar but now Wienke’s pet, is killed by Hauke’s horse on the dyke. Meanwhile, her pet dog, Pearl, having escaped ritual sacrifice, ends up being drowned along with Wienke and her mother and the horse pulling their trap, as Elke, defying the elements, attempts to drive out to her husband on the dyke, only to be engulfed by the floodwaters rushing in through the breach. The dykemaster’s grey too goes down with his suicidal master. Here again there is a contrastive echo of the opening of the journalist’s

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<sup>48</sup> Giblett, *Postmodern Wetlands*.

<sup>49</sup> Blackbourn, *Conquest of Nature*, 7.

<sup>50</sup> Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, 162.



article: while the latter's horse is allowed to take the initiative in seeking food and shelter for herself and her rider at the inn ("My horse *of its own accord* had already started down the track on the side of the dyke that led me to the door of the house." [emphasis added] D 15), Hauke's stallion is clearly forced *against his will* to plunge with his rider to their death:

Another jab of the spur; the horse's shrill cry rose above the noise of the storm and the thundering of the waves; then, below, from out of the plunging water, a muffled sound, a brief struggle. (D 115)

In the schoolmaster's narrative, Hauke's suicide is framed as quasi-redemptive: "Take me, Lord God," the dykemaster is said to have called out, "but have mercy on the others!" (D 115) While this prayer goes unanswered so far as his immediate family is concerned, the fact that his new dyke holds, and has continued to provide protection for the local community for nearly a century, is taken by the schoolmaster (and most of Storm's interpreters) as a vindication of the project to which he has dedicated his life, and in the service of which, so this story goes, he dies. Within the marginalized mythic account, meanwhile, Hauke's death, along with his horse, belatedly realizes the sacrificial rite that he had previously scorned, their bodies becoming the "living thing" that is required to help strengthen the dyke wall and plug a breach.

There is a sense, however, in which both rider and horse had long been subjected to a different kind of sacrificial regime: namely, that which Adorno and Horkheimer refer to as the "introversion of sacrifice" ordained by the quest for rational mastery: "The

subjective spirit which cancels the animation of nature can master a despiritualized nature only by imitating its rigidity and despiritualizing itself in turn.”<sup>51</sup> In this connection, it is noteworthy that Hauke’s very name, the Frisian form of Hugo, from the Middle High German *hugel/hoge*, meaning mind,<sup>52</sup> identifies him with the sovereignty of reason. Moreover, the kind of reason with which he is particularly gifted is calculative and instrumental, as evidenced by the mathematical genius that enables him, with the assistance of his grandfather’s Dutch version of Euclid’s geometry, to correctly diagnose the weakness in the traditional dyke and to design a superior model. Another kind of calculation, namely commercial, is clearly in play in his mixed motivations for pushing ahead, against considerable opposition, in having this built:

Another calculation occupied his thoughts: the foreland belonged to the community here, shared out among its individual members according to their property-holding within the district, or acquired by some other legal means: he began to count up how many shares he had acquired from his father, how many from Elke’s father, and how many he had bought during his marriage, partly with a hope of future profit and partly to develop his sheep breeding business; it was already an impressive amount; for he had also bought Ole Peters’ entire holding when he was devastated by the loss of his best ram during a flood [...] What excellent pasture and cornfields there would be, and of what value, when it was all enclosed by his new dyke! (D 62)

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<sup>51</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 55 and 57.

<sup>52</sup> Frühwald, “Hauke Haien, der Rechner,” 442.

Having profited from another's loss during a previous flood—not coincidentally, that of his arch-rival—it is presumably to protect these pastures and cornfields, in which he has a predominant interest, that Hauke prevents the men, acting under Ole Peters' orders, from artificially breaching the new dyke in the storm of 1756. This ensures that the old dyke breaches instead, inundating the old polder and endangering “the lives and property of the people upon it” (D101), but not his own fine home, built on higher ground, the lights of which he can still see blinking reassuringly above the flood.<sup>53</sup> An element of calculation even enters into Hauke's marriage: it was their shared gift for mathematics that created the bond between Hauke and Elke, but it was as the old dykemaster's daughter, and sole heir, that she initially interested him (“if he were to go to old Tede Volkerts, he would take a much closer look at her to see what kind of girl she really was.” [D28-29]). Moreover, having achieved his ambition of replacing her ineffectual father as dykemaster with the assistance of the inherited property that Elke transfers to his name, Hauke's calculation of future gain motivates that sacrifice of present pleasure already noted with regard to his unrelenting work ethic. The horse is made to share in this sacrificial regime, both literally, as his own independent agency is subordinated to his rider's objectives, even unto death, and figuratively, as symbolising the subordination of the body and its impulses to the dictates of reason (a trace of which is perhaps also visible in the shrivelled form of the rationalistic schoolmaster and the “unsuccessful courtship that got him stuck here in his hometown” [D17]).

Hauke's suicide, as Chenxi Tang has observed, both echoes and contrasts with that of another famous suicide in German literature: namely that of the protagonist of

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<sup>53</sup> This is consistent with recent research on the socially stratified distribution of vulnerability to so-called “natural” disasters. See e.g., in relation to the impact of hurricane Katrina, Hartman and Squires, *There is No Such Thing*.

Goethe's *Leiden des jungen Werthers* (*The Sorrows of Young Werther*, 1774). Each of these suicides arise from apparently antithetical views of nature, which are actually two sides of the same coin, sharing a common ground in the reification of Nature as society's Other within Western modernity. While Werther, the proto-Romantic, seeks unmediated oneness, Hauke "incarnates the urge of enlightened man to exert his power over nature from a distance" by means of purposive-rational action, entailing a "body politics of self-mutilation,"<sup>54</sup> and, in their respective deaths, these interlinked extremes can be seen to implode: Werther's suicide restores him to "the absolute stillness and immediacy of nature" but is at the same time an inscription of his own body that will in turn become the stuff of further mediation; Hauke's suicide is a final act of self-mastery, but one that returns the dyke builder to the "deep, engulfing immediacy of nature" in the very waters he had sought to keep at bay.<sup>55</sup> What Tang overlooks in *Der Schimmelreiter*, however, are the multiple narrative actants that resist the drive for domination: to bring these elements of resistance into critical focus is also to move beyond the theoretical impasse of the "dialectic of enlightenment" and towards a new materialist alternative to the problematic modern paradigm of either seamless oneness or distanced mastery.

It is, to begin with, Hauke's own body that rebels, responding to the stress of over-work by succumbing to "marsh fever"; an illness that hints at the "trans-corporeality," as Stacy Alaimo puts it, interlinking the seemingly separate self to others and the environment via "flows of substances [...] between people, places, and economic/political systems," which are largely invisible and often uncontainable.<sup>56</sup> While still in a weakened state, Hauke encounters a further locus of resistance: at the point

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<sup>54</sup> Tang, "Two German Deaths," 112 and 113.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 110 and 113.

<sup>56</sup> Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 9.

where the old and new dykes meet, the former has been weakened by a colony of mice who have made their homes in the wall, thereby rendering it more susceptible to erosion from the watercourse that he had blocked in order to create what has been dubbed the “Hauke Haien Polder.” To address this problem, Hauke would have to overcome yet another source of resistance, namely that of his fellow townsmen, whose hostility towards him had been enhanced by his harsh treatment and disregard for local custom in the building of the new dyke, and who would now be unwilling to commit to the labor and expense entailed in shoring up the old one.

In his moment of tragic *anagnorisis*, as recounted by the schoolmaster, Hauke identifies his guilt as a lack of follow-through in his project of aquatic mastery: “‘I confess, O God,’ he suddenly cried out into the storm, ‘I have failed in the duties of my office!’” (D 113). Storm himself appears to have shared this view of his protagonist’s fault, highlighting in particular that when Hauke returned to inspect the damage more closely he was beguiled by the lovely spring morning into considering the problem less serious than it was.<sup>57</sup> Hauke was, as the schoolmaster puts it, “unaware of how Nature can deceive us with her charms” (D103). This in itself is indicative of the would-be autonomous man of reason’s blindness to those environmental influences on his mood and state of mind, to which Storm’s own poetry bears eloquent witness, and that have since been amply theorised in the field of ecological aesthetics.<sup>58</sup> However, the text also hints that his project was flawed from the outset in Elke’s initial response to Hauke’s

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<sup>57</sup> Storm discussed the question of Hauke’s guilt in a letter to Ferdinand Tönnies from April 7, 1888: “Bei mir ist er körperlich geschwächt und so läßt er einmal gehen, wofür er sonst stets im Kampf gestanden; es kommt hinzu, daß seine zweite Besichtigung bei heller Sonne die Sache weniger bedenklich erscheinen läßt. Da aber, während Zweifel und Gewissensangst ihn umtreiben, kommt das Verderben. Er trägt eine Schuld, aber eine menschliche und verzeihliche.“ Qtd. Frühwald, “Hauke Haien,” 445.

<sup>58</sup> E.g. Böhme, “Aesthetic Theory of Nature.” See also Rigby, “Gernot Böhme’s Ecological Aesthetics.”

plans. In addition to her concern that this will entail “perilous work” against considerable local opposition, Elke warns that “[e]ver since I was a child I have heard that the watercourse cannot be blocked, and for that reason should never be touched.” (D63) Unlike the practice of infant or animal sacrifice that she also recalls in this conversation, this turns out to be a well-founded convention grounded in traditional environmental knowledge. Hauke evidently loves and respects his wife, but their relationship is not an equitable one, and she suppresses her concerns out of loyalty to him (a loyalty that will later cost her and their more-than-human household their lives). In ignoring her warning, Hauke acts in conformity with the hubris that he had displayed as an adolescent: “‘You’re no good,’ he would shout into the noise of the wind; ‘just like human beings!’” (D 20). This also serves to safeguard the sole authorship that he aspires to in this work, through which he wishes to demonstrate that he has earned the position of dykemaster by his own efforts, rather than inheriting it through her. Blocking the watercourse, moreover, constitutes the environmental analogue to the inhibition of those affective and bodily (specifically, seminal) flows, which Elke had also vainly sought to overcome in her rationalistic husband. From an ecological materialist perspective, it is here, in the illusion of individual self-determination, puritanical self-denial, and the domination of “nature”, that Hauke’s deeper fault lies, and from which the tragedy unfolds: one that is neither a divine judgement nor a natural disaster, but a natural-cultural calamity, in which diverse human and nonhuman actors and factors are unhappily entangled.

When she is gravely ill following the birth of their child, Elke, like Trin’ Jans on her deathbed, prefigures the catastrophic flood in which Hauke drowns. From a rationalistic perspective, these visions, which would appear highly portentous within the

suppressed mythic version of the narrative, should be dismissed as feverish fears or optical illusions. Viewed biosemiotically, however, they could well be interpreted as insightful abductions, arising from the recognition, below the level of rational consciousness, of those signs that suggested another disaster was in the making.<sup>59</sup> However that might be, contemporary readers would do well to pay more heed to Elke than did her husband, or, indeed, most professional interpreters of this text hitherto.<sup>60</sup> By contrast with both the dykemaster's instrumental rationality and the mythic thinking of the townsfolk, Elke manifests a relational rationality, oriented towards collective flourishing rather than either unidirectional control or seamless oneness. To follow this line of reasoning would be to endeavour to understand and negotiate multiple flows—corporeal, affective, environmental—rather than trying to shut them off in the pursuit of a singular pre-determined goal. In so doing, we might learn how to dance with the increasingly unruly elements in ways that could yet prevent the localised disasters that are already upon us from escalating into planetary catastrophe. Ideally, this would be a post-anthroparchal, or bio-inclusive, kind of dance, in which the wellbeing of nonhuman as well as human participants was seen to matter; but it would also be one in which the human capacity for critical self-reflection and moral reasoning, honed by the writing and reading of works of the creative imagination such as *Der Schimmelreiter*, might help us to invent some supple new moves.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Abduction is the term coined by Charles Sanders Peirce to refer to those intuitions or hunches that arise from semiotic processes of which we are largely unaware. Wendy Wheeler, “The Biosemiotic Turn: Abduction, or, the Nature of Creative Reason in Nature and Culture” in Goodbody and Rigby, *Ecocritical Theory*, 270-82.

<sup>60</sup> See however Segeberg, *Literarische Technik-Bilder*, 55-106.

<sup>61</sup> For an expanded discussion, please see my book *Dancing with Disaster*, from which segments of the third chapter have been excerpted and reprinted here in amended form, with kind permission of the University of Virginia Press.

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