Hans Lebert’s first novel, *Die Wolfsbaut* (1960), tells the story of a war crime: In 1945, shortly before the end of World War II, the paramilitary *Ortswacht* in the Styrian village of *Schweigen* murdered six Zwangsarbeiter in an old brick factory. The murderers covered up the traces of their crime and struck a vow of silence. Seven years later, one of the perpetrators is found dead at the same brick factory and the wall of silence begins to crumble. Against strong resistance, village outsider Johann Unfreund, a former sailor who returned to his father’s house after the war, pushes forward with the investigation. Unfreund discovers that his father had participated in the execution and that the father’s subsequent suicide was a result of his inability to live with this guilt. As the plot unfolds, the executioners, wary of being uncovered, either kill each other or die under strange circumstances. The *Matrose*, as Unfreund is called, uncovers the entire plot and finds the remnants of the murdered forced laborers. But before he can deliver hunter Habergeier, the former leader of the *Ortswacht*, to the police, Habergeier assumes the position of *Landrat* in the regional government, thereby gaining immunity from criminal prosecution. The frustrated sailor eventually departs, leaving behind the village and its inhabitants with a crime that goes unpunished.

Set in the late fall and winter months from November 1951 through February 1952, the novel’s almost six hundred pages quite overtly connect descriptions of Austria’s dirty nature with the country’s then largely ignored National Socialist past. Muddy fields, foul-smelling dung heaps and manure pools, and a seemingly unceasing rain frame the violent plot with a fittingly depressing environment. Descriptions of an anthropomorphized nature indicate fascism’s continuing hold on the village: «Die Bäume längs der Fahr- bahn standen Spalier und hoben grüßend ihre Hände hoch; in weißen Stutzen marschierten die Prellsteine auf; die Windstöße knatterten wie Standarten und Fahnen» (*Wolfsbaut* 185–86). For readers familiar with Austrian postwar literary history, these polemical descriptions of Austria’s natural landscape will likely evoke associations with writers such as Thomas Bernhard, Gerhard Roth, and Elfriede Jelinek. Indeed, these writers, and quite a few more
whose critique of post-1945 Austrian politics and society targeted the country’s much-touted tourism imagery, directly or indirectly refer to Lebert as a decisive influence for their own writing.\(^1\)

Despite these parallels, Lebert’s *Die Wolfsbaut* did not spark anything like the heated debates generated by the performances of Thomas Bernhard’s play *Heldenplatz* or of Jelinek’s dramatic works performed at the Viennese Burgtheater. In 1960 – a time when the Austrian process of memory was dominated by the view that the country was Hitler Germany’s first victim – Lebert’s novel indeed was a «book too soon» (Bushell).\(^2\) Another likely cause for the reading public’s muted reaction in 1960, and for the still cautious critical treatment after the novel’s republication in 1990, has been the text’s mixture of nature descriptions with metaphysical ruminations about the absence of god, which for many critics put the text in suspiciously close proximity to the blood-and-soil imagery of National Socialism.

In this article I will show that *Die Wolfsbaut*’s treatment of dirty nature has meaning beyond being a metaphor for Austria’s «dirty» history. Applying Wolfgang Iser’s concept of «literary anthropology,» I first discuss the literary representation of nature in its metaphorical and metaphysical form as a manifestation of a broader human experience of reality. This perspective allows me to study literary appearances of nature as a repository for the memory of traumatic events in Austria’s past. Second, I move beyond the analysis of nature in the text to studying the text as an element of nature, or, to be more precise, to probing *Die Wolfsbaut*’s role in what Hubert Zapf calls «cultural ecology.» In this regard I discuss to what extent Lebert’s novel reappropriates the realm of the natural from its reactionary National Socialist embrace and offers an ethical challenge to the latter based on reenvisioning the embeddedness of humans in the larger natural «mesh» (Morton).

«CSI Schweigen:» Nature and the Locating/Avenging of a Crime

In *Die Wolfsbaut*, descriptions of dirty nature and unpleasant landscapes underscore nature’s role as memory keeper and avenger. The place of the original murder of the forced laborers, the dilapidating brick factory, is marked by a crippled oak tree and a non-fertile strip of grass, the «fahle Streifen» (26). In contrast to the conventional images of *Heimatliteratur* and tourism, in which a fertile, growing nature is evidence for the healthy condition of the related Austrian community, nature in its deformed and non-fertile state in *Die Wolfsbaut* becomes a constant reminder of the repressed. Even if the community initially feigns ignorance about the cause of this barren strip of grass – «Wir haben keine Ahnung, was es mit ihm für eine Bewandtnis hat»
(26) – the sailor’s subsequent discovery of the rotting bones of the murdered forced laborers in the soil under the brick factory confirms the suspicion that the «fahle Streifen» is the visible manifestation of a «buried» negative event. At one point, the pale strip turns into a mud slide and almost buries the police commissioner, seemingly punishing his pursuit of rumors about an exhibitionist instead of investigating the war crime.

The environment takes an even more active role in bringing «justice» to the former executioners. Two former members of the Ortswacht die in close proximity to the ruins of the brick factory. While the first incident generates anxiety due to the fact that the deceased is a fairly young man whose death, for lack of other evidence, is ruled a heart attack, the second death clearly bears all the signs of an assassination: The old saw mill operator Schreckenschlager, another participant in the murder of the forced laborers, is found with his head split open between the brick factory and the crippled oak tree. Schreckenschlager, as the reader will learn later, was killed by forester Rotschädel, another member of the execution commando, in order to prevent further revelations about the war crime. Rotschädel eventually meets his fate in the woods, when he becomes impaled on a broken tree branch after apparently running from an unknown threat. The narrator’s description of the location evokes images of a tribal hunting scene: The branches function as «Fangarme[,]» holding the forester’s torn clothes like «Speere[,]» Rotschädel’s jacket is ripped apart, «zerfetzt wie von Krallen und Zähnen,» and his body is found kneeling against a tree: «Und der Stumpf eines Astes ragte ihm rot aus dem Rücken» (Wolfsbaut 458–59).

The Roman historian Tacitus had already noted somewhat admiringly that, for the «Barbarians,» the forest was the most important natural «ingredient» of German identity construction and seemed to function as ultimate judicial authority, because «traitors and deserters are hanged from trees» (Schama 86). Tacitus’s Germania offers, in the words of Schama, the basis for a theory of social geography, whose much-distorted and misinterpreted version reappears in the twentieth century, when National Socialist concepts of social engineering concentrate on alleged parallels between sustainable forest management and eugenics. As Michael Imort writes, the National Socialists embraced the concept of the «Dauerwald» – the precursor of what is today often called eco-forestry – not because they were closeted environmentalists; rather, the idea of cutting down weaker and thinner trees to provide more space and light for stronger ones resonated with the Social Darwinistic visions of an eternal German Volk (52–53; 55).

As forester Rotschädel’s death indicates, the forest around Schweigen is no «Dauerwald,» for the woods do not spare those who count themselves among
the strong and who cling to National Socialist ideology. Moreover, as the erratic growth patterns of the grass around the brick factory suggest, the natural environment seems to reject any «collaboration» in the crime. What initially appears as dirty and cruel nature can be read as Lebert’s attempt to extend the National Socialist blood-and-soil ideology to its extreme by showing that the perpetrators, who justified their murders by referring to nature’s «selection process,» are in the end at the mercy of these very same forces.

There is, however, much resistance in the secondary literature to focusing on nature’s role as agent. Repeatedly, critics argue that the depiction of nature in *Die Wolfsbaut* is embedded in a problematic intellectual framework based on German composer Richard Wagner’s transformation of Germanic mythology into a foundation for the German sense of cultural and national superiority. Indeed, Hans Lebert, who was a well-known Wagner tenor before and even during the early years of World War II, frequently and liberally references Wagner’s work, especially the monumental opera cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen.* In addition to the novel’s title, *Die Wolfsbaut*, the epigraph also refers to Siegmund’s futile quest to find his (god)father Odin/Wotan: «Eines Wolfes Fell nur / traf ich im Forst; / leer lag das vor mir: / Den Vater / fand ich nicht.» The Wagnerian version of Siegmund’s search for god/father Odin/Wotan forms the template for sailor Johann Unfreund’s attempt to find out what role his father played in the execution of the forced laborers. The sailor’s realization that his father is a murderer and that he, therefore, lacks a father in the sense of a comforting role model is linked to a general questioning of the existence of god as a moral authority throughout the novel. Other references to Wagner can be found in the depictions of photographer Karl Maletta, a traumatized ex-soldier, and teacher Ilse Jakobi, a former leader in the National Socialist *Bund deutscher Mädel*. These two characters are to some extent modeled on the Wagnerian characters of Siegfried and Brunhilde, whereby Maletta’s inability to break through Jakobi/Brunhilde’s ring of fire makes him an impotent Siegfried whose self-hatred eventually turns against the entire village.

Lebert’s own interpretation of *Die Wolfsbaut* as an example of «Transparenzismus,» a self-designed style that attempts to realize metaphysical forces and phenomena through aesthetic configurations, further encouraged some scholars to ignore references to the materiality of nature and read *Die Wolfsbaut* (and some of his earlier texts) as grand literary treatments of justice and repentance «in the great Jewish-Christian tradition» (Caputo-Mayr 80). Jürgen Egyptien embraces Lebert’s concept of «transparentism» without hesitation and reads *Die Wolfsbaut* as a narrative about the absent god («deus absconditus»), and, ultimately, as a literary parable about good and evil in which
National Socialism is merely a helpful example: «In letzter Instanz ist selbst in der Wolfshaut der Nationalsozialismus als historische Materialisation des Bösen eitel, eine austauschbare Emanation. Es ist nur ein, wenngleich auch das vielleicht böseste Stück, das auf der Bühne der Geschichte bislang gespielt wurde» (180).

For those critics who read Die Wolfshaut as a historical novel, the complex and sometimes indeed confusing «Wagner-Recycling»6 interfered with the text’s anti-fascist message. As literary historian Norbert Frei writes, Die Wolfshaut exemplifies the failed attempts to tap the «Traditionsfundus der Metaphernsprache» by a group of postwar Austrian writers, who exhibit a «naives Vertrauen in die Abbildfähigkeit gehabter Kunstformen» and overestimate their capacity to use these literary devices in a way that is «spielerisch-intellektuell» (212). Even critics who otherwise view Lebert’s work in a more positive light, emphasize that «das Thema NS-Verbrechen und dessen Aufdeckung und Vergeltung […] in einer so magisch wie vagen Atmosphäre finsterer Vergeltungsmächte [verlorengeht]» (Fliedl and Wagner 312–13).

Interestingly, both camps find evidence for their contrasting interpretations in the same plot elements of Die Wolfshaut, namely in Karl Maletta’s imagined transformation into a wolf. The traumatized ex-soldier struggles with life in what he perceives to be a backward and crude community, which views him as an easy scapegoat and mocks him at will. Alienated from the villagers, Maletta develops an increasing sensitivity towards nature. His body reacts to changing weather patterns; elements of the surrounding nature, such as trees, mountains, and clouds, appear to him as animate beings. The pace of this gradual change quickens when the village teacher loans Maletta a book titled «Curieuse und nutzbare ANMERKUNGEN von Natur- und Kunstgeschichten zusammengestellt von KANOLD 1728,» which describes, among other things, the «lycanthropos,» a process whereby humans turn into wolves (95). Maletta immediately recognizes these symptoms in himself, as his hateful attitude towards the villagers morphs into visions of violence: «Er dachte: ‹Irgendein Kerl geht in den Wald, irgendeiner von der Bande da; er meint, im Wald und auf der Heide sei gut sein – und jetzt – jetzt hetz ihn! […] Jetzt reiß ihn in Stücke!!! […] Hetz ihn zu Tode, mein Wolf!›» (198–99).

For Egyptien, this subplot is evidence for Die Wolfshaut’s larger religio-philosophical message: «Die faschistoide Gewalttätigkeit der Landschaft ist bloß ihre aktuale [sic] Imprägnierung. Die Natur fungiert als Organon eines transzendenten Kraftfeldes […]» and the «Gestalt rätselhafter Naturphänomene» is only the visualization of evil (130). Egyptien claims that the representation of nature in the artistic realm of literature cancels out any connections to historical reality and that Die Wolfshaut explodes «die Gattung
des historischen Romans und ist nur oberflächlich betrachtet ein literarischer Beitrag zur ‹Vergangenheitsbewältigung› in Österreich» (179).

By contrast, literary scholar J.J. Long, who interprets *Die Wolfs haut* as an important text addressing a crucial historical episode in Austrian history, reads this entire subplot as a quasi-didactic passage about the political functions of myths. Long points out that, practically simultaneously to Maletta’s imagined transformation into a wolf, hunter Habergeier sparks a rumor about an actual wolf threatening the village. His goal is to rally the villagers around a perceived «real» danger and to frustrate the sailor’s inquiry into the war crime. Focusing on the retrospective questioning of the validity of some of Maletta’s experiences by the narrator, Long concludes that the mythological references enable Lebert «to show how, in the hands of an unreliable narrator and the village community he represents, a metaphor can take on a life of its own and come to function as an explanatory model for events that appear to have no direct physical cause» (92).

Long reads the violent events described in the novel as a repetition of the original violent act, the murder of the forced laborers, and as generated by the inability of the villagers (and by extension of the Austrians) to face their criminal past.7 Sailor Johann Unfreund functions as a detective and, after uncovering the murders, also comes close to assuming the role of «therapist» for the traumatized village, whose name – *Schweigen* – does indeed point to a problematic silencing of the past (Long 88). However, *Die Wolfs haut* forecloses a therapeutic solution when the last remaining culprit, hunter Habergeier, acquires immunity from prosecution via his political position and Unfreund accepts the futility of his efforts at confronting the villagers with their past crimes and leaves the village.

As convincing as Long’s reading is, he, too, builds his argument on an assumed split between a rational and an irrational perspective on nature, whereby the latter is explained and thereby contained by references to an external heuristic system drawn from psychoanalytic theory.8 As a consequence, the potential of nature descriptions, allegories, and metaphors in a broader discussion of the connection between memory processes and nature remains largely untapped. By explaining Maletta’s experience of turning into a wolf as based on an unreliable narrator, Long implicitly discredits Maletta’s reflections on a nature-based ethics and thereby ignores a crucial aspect of the discourse of memory in *Die Wolfs haut*. By drawing on Wolfgang Iser’s concept of «literary anthropology,» I will investigate what happens when the imaginary and metaphysical references to nature are viewed not as the opposite of a rational construction of reality but as an example of literature’s capacity to double and expand human experience.
Dangerous Reflections: Nature as Reverse Mirror of Human Experience

One day before the apparent heart attack of young Hans Höller – the first of the deaths that disturb life in Schweigen – Karl Maletta experiences a strange phenomenon on the road next to the brick factory. He feels as if something touched him, and as he looks around and up the hill to sailor Unfreund’s house, he perceives what looks like a person hanging from an apple tree, swinging in the wind. This apparition results in Maletta’s changed self-perception:

Und plötzlich hatte er das Gefühl, in ein Kreuz verwandelt zu sein, in ein Kreuz aus tausend Fäden, die leise vibrierten und sich unsichtbar spannten von Schweigen zur Bahnstation Kahldorf, vom Schweigen des Waldes zum Schweigen der Einschicht-höfe und von der Töpferhütte [the sailor’s house] zur Ziegelei. Er selber aber war der Mittelpunkt, […] wo sich all diese Fäden kreuzten, wo sie leise erbebend einander berührten und ein Geräusch erzeugten, ähnlich dem rasselnden Flügelschlag einer Libelle. (Wolfsbaut 28)

At first glance, this experience can be read as initial indication of the traumatized veteran’s deteriorating mental condition. After all, he climbs up the hill to the sailor’s house only to discover that what he thought to be a hanged person is in fact the tree trunk that houses the water fountain. However, as the novel progresses, it becomes apparent that Maletta’s vision constitutes a precise map of the war crime around which the entire plot revolves.

In order to make sense of the tension between Maletta’s imagined experience of nature and the role this experience plays in revealing actual (not imagined) war crimes, it is helpful to draw on Wolfgang Iser’s concept of «literary anthropology,» which rethinks literature’s connecting of the fictional, the imaginary, and the real within an anthropological paradigm. As Iser argues, literature’s value with regard to «anthropological» insights lies in the interplay between «the fictional and the imaginary» (228). The fictional, so Iser, should not be read in opposition to reality but, rather, as a «means of overstepping the given, which is bound to cause a transformation of what is» (214). The reason for this feedback loop of the fictional onto the «given» reality lies, paradoxically, in the impossibility to disprove fiction through reasoning: Whereas any experimental setup in historical reality can be questioned by hypothesizing, fiction can always escape evaluative scrutiny by pointing to its status outside the given reality. And yet, it is from this position outside the grasp of the usual laws of reality, which we accept as the foundation of our given world, that fiction «offers a standpoint from which to investigate the anthropological makeup of man» (215).

Instead of viewing the fictional in opposition to the real, Iser encourages its understanding as «an instrument […] that taps our imaginary resources» and
helps us to see the world from a new perspective (218). The imaginary is, thus, not the same as the fictional. Rather, the fictional is «the medium» through which the imaginary «assume[s] a tangible gestalt» (222). As «medium,» the fictional enables the manifestation of the imaginary, but this does not mean that the imaginary event is fully dominated by the fictional «perspective imposed by the medium. [The imaginary] manifests itself, rather, as a difference that cannot be deduced from the medium itself. This difference spotlights the imaginary as resistance to conceptualization» (224). So, instead of looking at the imaginary, which becomes manifest through the fictional, as an element that transcends reality, we should think of the imaginary as an extension, a «doubling» of reality, which reveals the blind spots of our cultural reality better than other conceptual frameworks:

It must be stressed again that literature does not reflect that reality, but mirrors its reverse side, which would otherwise remain hidden by the cultural context itself, and it is the mirroring that conditions literature’s formation of cultural reality. By throwing into relief the uncharted regions of the prevailing culture, it changes the map, which is overlaid by the imagery of what remains cognitively unfathomable. (228)

*Die Wolfshaut*’s narrative structure clearly encourages a reading of the descriptions of nature as an expansion of human reality and as a visualization of the «uncharted regions of the prevailing culture» (Iser 228) by emphasizing the blind spots of conventional Cartesian mappings of nature. «Ja. Aber werfen wir erst einen Blick auf die Karte,» the narrator invites the reader already on the novel’s opening page (*Wolfshaut* 7). The subsequent description of the map shows the villages of *Schweigen* and *Kahlendorf*, their combined train station, and the single-track railroad that ends a couple of stations later. The map also displays the mountain range of the *Ebergebirge*, hugged by the road between *Kahlendorf* and *Schweigen*, which passes by the «verdächtige[n] Ziegelofen» (7). The overall underwhelming atmosphere of this «gottverlassene Gegend» is summarized in the paragraph’s conclusion: «Und sonst…? Das hier sind Äcker, das hier ist der Wald; die Punkte da bezeichnen einsame Höfe, und die Striche: Wege, die sich im Walde verlaufen» (7).

About twenty pages later, shortly before Karl Maletta has his strange experience near the brick factory, the narrator once again invites the reader to take a look at the place:

>Betrachten wir den Ort in aller Ruhe: […] Rechts an dem lehmigen Absturz, der mit niederem Buschwerk bedeckt ist, hockt, dem höher beginnenden Walde benachbart, das Haus des Matrosen und lauert mit winzigen Fenster-Augen herab. Ihm gegenüber, auf einem unbebauten Stück Land (wo niemals etwas recht gedeihen wollte) ragen die halbzerstürzten Mauern der Ziegelei […] An dem zugewach-
The two-dimensional, Cartesian representation of nature and landscape through dots and symbols in the first quote falls short of conveying a sense of place. Instead of providing orientation, the map produces disorientation: The phrase «Wege, die sich im Walde verlaufen» alludes to the proverbial «Holzweg,» a popular German phrase for being on the wrong path.9 While both passages begin with an invitation to the reader, the different quality of the second description becomes apparent in the replacement of the colloquial «Werfen wir [...] einen Blick [...] auf die Karte» with «Betrachten wir den Ort in aller Ruhe.» A concentrated, perhaps even contemplative – quiet – focus substitutes for a casual glance. Moreover, the map as scientific abstraction of place from nature has disappeared in favor of a supposedly unmediated gaze at place in nature. Where the first quote offers a list of general categories through nouns such as «Äcker,» «Wald,» «Höfe,» the second mapping of what is arguably the novel’s most significant location uses a series of adjectives, verbs, and nouns.

It is important to note that the second quote is not simply an emphasis on the materiality of dirty nature, but a more nuanced description indicative of the relationships between the elements of natural and manmade landscape: The «lehmige [...] Absturz» is covered with «niederem Buschwerk;» the sailor’s house «hockt» up on the hill and «lauert mit winzigen Fenster-Augen herab;» the walls of the brick factory are «halb-zerstört» and the driveway is «zugewachsen.» Most importantly, when the description addresses the pale strip of infertile grass it allows for nature to become active so that «Er kriecht wie eine Schlange» and «Er kommt wieder und verschwindet wieder.» The realism offered by the animated appearance of nature is the very «reality mirrored in reverse» that Iser views as central to literature’s anthropological function.

The novel’s almost self-conscious correction of the mapping of the crime scene functions like a manual for the subsequent descriptions of nature and their links to memory. Over the course of the novel different degrees of awareness of natural processes separate those who try to repress the memory of the crime and those who try to uncover it. As hunters, saw mill operators, foresters, and farmers, most of the villagers view the natural environment as...
an exploitable resource and as a realm in need of constant disciplining and organizing. Early on, the novel presents this economic perspective on nature in a negative light: «[E]s war das Jahrhundert der Baumfäller, das Jahrhundert des sinkenden Grundwasserspiegels; das Leben war auf dem Rückzug; die Wüste rückte vor» (67). Ignorant of this process, the murderers celebrate their allegedly timeless connection to nature as the core aspect of their identity in a telling Stammtisch scene:


In this scene, a supposedly timeless peasant attitude – a stock element of Heimatliteratur and Heimatfilme – shows its opportunistic flip side: Regardless of how immovable one’s identity is perceived, the passing of time creates new contexts that also shape this identity process. For the locals of Schweigen, this translates into the need to forget. Not surprisingly, the village council of Schweigen decides to cut down the trees along the road next to the brick factory in order to modernize the village for tourism at the same time that sailor Johann Unfreund digs out the remains of the murdered forced laborers buried in the ruins of the brick factory (Wolfshaut 542–44).

The villagers’ implicit understanding of the connection between time and nature – as it manifests itself in their allegedly natural identity – is very different from how the two protagonists Johann Unfreund and Karl Maletta view that same connection. Johann Unfreund’s sensitivity towards nature is indicated by an awareness of the long cycles of nature and evolution. Imagining what the surrounding alpine landscape looked like when it was still an ocean floor, «Matrose» Unfreund sees in the clay he uses for his pottery – «einmal emporgetaucht aus dem Weltozean» – the «Zeichen der Vorzeit bewahrt (Schalen, Muscheln und Stachelflossen, Versteinerungen einer versunkenen Welt)» (Wolfshaut 69). In its description of prehistoric fossils as meaningful signs of life’s watery origins, this passage connects the organic cycles of nature, the processes of petrification, with the processes of history and memory. The fossils in the clay foreshadow the skeletal remains of the murdered forced laborers that the sailor will eventually dig out of the soil in the brick factory.

The ex-soldier Karl Maletta shares a similar awareness of natural processes and of the dangerous exploitation of nature by humans: «Sie [human beings] haben einen unwahrscheinlichen Verstand, aber die Reife und Weisheit von Halbwüchsigen. Sie werden uns die Welt zur Hölle machen; sie werden
uns die Erde betonieren und die Luft vergiften» (Wolfshaut 391). While Unfreund’s repeated memory of «das blaue Lied,» a nostalgic flashback to his first love, enables him to keep a somewhat positive, if cynical, outlook on life, his alter-ego Maletta perceives mostly the decaying and rotting element of nature:

Er wischte sich den Schweiß. Dabei beschmierte er sich mit dem Lehm, der ihm zäher an den Fingern klebte. Er zog sein Taschentuch heraus und wollte sich sauber machen. Da ward auch dieses voller Lehm; und Lehm war in der Hosentasche! Überall die fahle Schmiere! […] Er war mit Kot gezeichnet. (Wolfshaut 104–05)

Maletta’s particular experience of nature illustrates Iser’s literary «doubling» effect, which allows us to «see ourselves in that within which we are entangled» (228). Not only is Maletta the first character in the novel who senses the overall configuration of the village’s criminal secret, but the temporary and imaginary appearance of the hanged person on the apple tree triggers Maletta’s own process of remembering: «Es gab in seiner Vergangenheit einen Gehängten, nämlich irgendeine Schweinerei, von ihm als peinlich aus dem Bewußtsein verdrängt, die aber nun bei manchem Anlaß in dieser oder jener Maske aus seinem Untergrund emporstieg, um ihn zu erschrecken» (Wolfshaut 28).

The «Gehängte» in Maletta’s past is a reference to his own participation in a war crime, namely in the execution of an entire village by his Wehrmacht unit. The character’s connection of the temporary imagination of a changed nature and landscape with the repressed memory of a past event underscores that the imaginary’s usual manifestation as momentary, sudden occurrence often covers up its actual function: «[The imaginary] precedes what is, even if it can only show itself through what is» (Iser 221).

Maletta the «wolf,» who turns against his fellow humans, is the retroactive visualization of Maletta the war criminal and exemplifies the working of the imaginary in the sense that «whatever has been left behind is dragged along in the wake of the individual acts and remains a potential presence» (Iser 222). Similar to the novel’s didactic use of two different maps, which model the meaningful reading of nature and landscape descriptions with regard to the location of the crime, the use of Kanold’s treatise on the «lycanthropos» by Maletta points to the role of literature as the reverse mirror of human reality. During a close reading of Kanold’s text, an already delirious Maletta concludes that he is not actually turning into a wolf, but that he dreams about acts of violence that are instead committed by the «evil master» while he himself is asleep and, ultimately, innocent of any crime: «[D]aß sie in tiefem Schlaf und Traum das Vieh zu beschädigen sich bedünken lassen, indessen aber nicht von ihrer Schlafstelle kommen, sondern ihr Meister dasjenige statt ihrer verrichtet, was ihre Phantasie ihnen vorstellt und zueignet» (Wolfshaut 524).
Instead of framing this bizarre subplot as an illustration of a political myth that stands in the way of the sailor’s rational investigation of the crime (see my previous discussion of Long’s approach), I look at it as an example of literature’s «reverse cultural mirroring» through images of nature. As Wolfgang Iser writes, «[t]he fictionality of literature is not identical to the result it creates, but is rather a modus operandi» that produces something new through a series of «intratextual» and «extratextual» «boundary-crossings» (Iser 216). Maletta’s imagined transformation into a projected element of nature – a wolf – with decidedly negative connotations can be read as the actualization of his earlier wolf-like behavior during the execution of innocent women and children, where it was he himself, and not an «evil master,» who committed a criminal act: «[E]rst Jahre später […] ist mir diese Heldenat zu Kopf gestiegen. Seither spüre ich ein heftiges Verlangen, nachzuholen, was ich damals unterlassen habe: mich umzudrehen und in die andere Richtung zu schießen […]» (Wolfshaut 389).

The figure of the wolf is an example of the complex boundary crossings of the literary process. Intratextually, the wolf picks up the motif of the novel’s title and epitaph, substituting the war criminal Maletta as fill-in for the absent father figure. In doing so it illustrates the sailor’s shock at having to abandon the positive image of his father due to the latter’s involvement in the execution of the forced laborers. Extratextually, the novel’s time of production and first publication is close enough to the end of World War II to allow for an association of the wolf in connection to the Werwolf resistance, a much-hyped but barely realized attempt to form Nazi guerilla squads that would continue to combat the Allied forces. Significantly, this is not the reading the novel supports. Rather, Maletta’s plan is to turn around and shoot in the direction of the former National Socialists, and, importantly, in the direction of himself: Before he can enact any revenge fantasies, he dies at the hand of the sailor, who, riled up by the rumors of an actual wolf threatening the village, mistakes the approaching Maletta in the middle of the night for the dangerous animal and fatally shoots him.

What is new in Lebert’s novel and remarkable for its timing is the inclusion of an Austrian soldier’s reflection about his participation in the murder of civilians during his service in the National Socialist Wehrmacht. As historian Heidemarie Uhl details, the official and mainstream interpretations of the role of Austrian soldiers in the German Wehrmacht changed significantly in the decade before the publication of Die Wolfshaut. Their representation as victims of a murderous German system that forced them to participate in an unwanted war was replaced by their being celebrated as heroic and dutiful soldiers (Uhl 4). Against this trend, Die Wolfshaut in 1960 presents an Austri-
an protagonist who not only admits to having participated in a war crime, but who underscores that possessing actual courage would have meant disobeying the order: «Ich hab’ gewußt: was da befohlen wird, ist ein Verbrechen. Und trotzdem hab’ ich gehorcht und habe geschossen» (Wolfshaut 389).

While Maletta’s role as war criminal is mentioned in passing by a few critics, the significance of his admission for the process of memory remains unexplored in the critical literature. The underlying structure of the detective novel invites readers to focus instead on the process of how the allegedly untainted outsider Johann Unfreund attempts to uncover a crime and bring the perpetrators to justice. Compared to Maletta’s experiences of metaphysical and supernatural phenomena, the sailor’s largely reason-based inquiries into the crime offer an easier access route for a critical reading. However, by focusing on how an outsider’s enlightened investigation into a war crime is frustrated by the rural community’s continuing embrace of National Socialist ideology, Die Wolfshaut’s historical significance as a text about the complex processes of remembering and the ambivalence of human actions is reduced.

«Wir bleiben wir»: Nature, Ecology, and Ethics

Die Wolfshaut’s imaginative use of the natural environment as a means to render visible a then largely ignored aspect of Austria’s participation in the National Socialist war of aggression also illustrates the role of literature as an element of cultural ecology. Developed by Hubert Zapf, the concept describes the development of cultural narratives and discourses as not identical with, but analogous to, the system of natural evolution. As Zapf emphasizes, «[r]ather than genetic laws, information and communication have become major driving forces of cultural evolution» («Ecocriticism» 137). Literature functions as an ecological agent in the sense that it «breaks up ossified social structures and ideologies,» «symbolically empowers the marginalized,» and «reconnects what is culturally separated» («Ecocriticism» 138).

The concept of literature (and art in general) as a kind of cultural ecosystem has important ramifications for the discussion of ethics. Stories not only offer an opportunity to engage with ethical questions on a specific rather than an abstract level, but they also open up room for the «enactment of the dialogical interdependence between self and other, and beyond that of the irreducible difference and alterity of the other which is central to ethics» («Literary Ecology» 853). This link between narrative and ethics appears to be most productive in texts where «the boundary of the culture-nature relationship […] as the textual site where ecological concerns and the ethical self-reflection of the human species are brought together» («Literary Ecology» 860).
When Karl Maletta tells the sailor about his participation in the murder of innocent people, he offers an example of *Die Wolfshaut*’s retroactive affirmation of an ethical standpoint through a reflection on the relationship between self and other based on the link between culture and nature. After detailing how the soldiers could have easily turned against their officer but chose to obey his order to kill, Maletta concludes: «[I]ch war genau die gleiche Null wie alle andern […]. Seither weiß ich, daß ich damals auf mich selbst geschossen habe […]. Und daß man von Natur aus mehr als eine Null ist, und daß es an Selbstmord grenzt, sich als Null zu verhalten» (*Wolfshaut* 559; emphasis in the original).

Maletta realizes that empathy with one’s fellow human beings is the prerequisite for calling oneself a human and that the failure to do so is unnatural. This must be read against the villagers’ earlier emphasis of a «natural» and unchanging identity position, expressed in the statement that «[w]ir bleiben wir! […] Egal was auch kommen mag.» Their claim rings hollow in the context of their behavior during and after the war. This repudiation of a circular and self-referential definition of the ontological positionality of humans underscores *Die Wolfshaut*’s role as a cultural ecological agent that attacks the blind spots of a community’s identity narrative. The text «symbolically empowers the marginalized» by enabling two characters, Maletta and Unfreund, to express highly unpopular views for the time, and it «reconnects what is culturally separated» by liberating the concept of nature from its stifling embrace by reactionary ideological discourses («Ecocriticism» 138).

An even more poignant example for the novel’s use of the «culture-nature relationship» as basis for the discussion of ethics is *Die Wolfshaut*’s subplot revolving around a fugitive prisoner: At the time when the villagers are riled up by hunter Habergeier’s rumor that a wolf threatens the village, the chief of police Habicht receives a report about an escaped prisoner who might hide in the woods between Kahldorf and Schweigen. While the villagers fan out through the forest to hunt down the fugitive, the latter seeks refuge in the house of the sailor: «Und dann gewahrte [der Matrose] das Zebra. Es stand reg los zwischen den vordersten Stämmen, schon halb von der Dämmerung ausgewischt, und sah ihn aus schreckgeweiteten Tieraugen an» (*Wolfshaut* 188).

While the identification of the fugitive as zebra is initially based on the prisoner’s striped overall, the symbolic blurring of the boundary between culture and nature transforms the fugitive into a symbol of the above mentioned ethical stance of respect for the «alterity of the other» («Literary Ecology» 853). At first, the «Matrose» attempts to maintain his cynical attitude by claiming that his assistance for the fugitive is simply the result of boredom (*Wolfshaut* 191). Soon however, the zebra’s description of his experiences in prison and
the desire to gain freedom touch upon the sailor’s own longing to recover a lost sense of freedom and peace, symbolized by his attempt to hear again «das blaue Lied.» In the zebra’s account of his escape, the perception of nature from a supposedly non-human viewpoint plays an important role: «Schuld daran, daß ich so dastehe, ist der Geruch des verfaulten Laubes.» […] «Ich weiß, Sie verstehen mich nicht. Weil Sie noch ein Mensch sind. Menschen haben ein großes Gehirn, aber ihre Nasen sind verkümmert» (Wolfshaut 192).

In the zebra’s description, the separation of human existence from nature is symbolized by a diminished capacity for sensory perception, which diminishes the substance of humanity. Becoming an animal is a way to reconnect with nature, is a way to remain human at a time when humans have turned into machines:


The zebra’s account reminds the sailor of his own entrapment, but also brings him closer again to the «blaue[s] Lied,» the song that symbolizes a lost sense of freedom and humanness (202). Forced to flee the house of the sailor before the advancing police force, the fugitive prisoner eventually turns himself in by showing up in the empty village square as «eine Kugel, ungefähr in den Farben der traurigen Erde» (337).

By describing the fugitive as transformed into a miniature version of the earth – a round ball covered in mud and leaves – the novel offers a direct challenge to the «alienating forces of a purely economic form of globalization […] indifferent to the concrete ecosystems of particular places and regions» («Literary Ecology» 860). In Die Wolfshaut these forces are manifest in the attitudes of Schweigen’s lumberjacks, foresters, and hunters, all of whom are also Nazis and perpetrators who try to keep buried the inconvenient truths of the past. When they finally find the fugitive, they first torture him until he (falsely) confesses to having killed the saw mill operator Schreckenschlager; they then shoot and kill him during an attempted escape.

The killing of the zebra is a stark reminder of the fate of escaped concentration camp inmates who were often hunted down by the local population, but it also casts an uncomfortably bright spotlight onto the small-minded and moralistic attitudes that facilitate the emergence of ideologies such as fascism and National Socialism in the first place. Aside from a few petty thefts, the fugitive’s real «crime» was the attempt to live outside the rules and norms of a
society for which the term value has meaning only in the context of trade and profit. Instead of recognizing and respecting the zebra’s views as a valid ethical challenge to their worldview, the villagers can only perceive it as a violation of their self-righteous and moralistic attitudes and, consequently, silence the zebra’s voice. By killing the zebra, the villagers not only maintain their view of nature as a force that needs to be disciplined, but they also fail the ethical litmus test in the face of a true challenge by an «other.»

The representation of the fugitive as zebra is a radical expansion of the ethical challenge in Maletta’s statement, which describes empathy towards the other and resistance against power as the essence of humanity. By describing these obligations as the defining quality of human beings’ *qua nature*, the statement implies that humans must try to recognize and respect in even the most extreme appearances of otherness manifestations of their own human condition. The failure to do so, and the resulting destruction of the other, is, in its final consequence, an act of self-destruction. One has to realize, as Maletta has, «daß es an Selbstmord grenzt, sich als eine Null zu verhalten» (559).

However, it is important to keep in mind that literary fictionality is «not identical to the result it creates» and that the underlying acts of «selection,» «combination,» and «self-disclosure» are beyond an author’s full control (Iser 216). In other words, it becomes necessary to apply the critical frameworks derived from «literary anthropology» and «cultural ecology» also to those elements of the text that are presented as least fictional. In Lebert’s *Die Wolfshaut*, this becomes important with regard to the problematic gendering of organic natural processes. In the previously quoted passage in which the narrator characterizes the place of the crime with terms such as Unkraut and Schlange, the narrator invokes a religious image reservoir that anticipates the misogynist connection of dirty and unpleasant elements of nature with images of a dangerously seductive and simultaneously contaminating female sexuality. Throughout the novel, Maletta, and to a lesser degree Unfreund, repeatedly refer to women’s smelly armpits and the perceived «Bocksgeruch» of sexual arousal to express disgust (*Wolfshaut* 286). Active sexual behavior by women is connected to a fascist body cult, as Maletta’s repeated reference to the soldierly appearance of the village teacher, Ilse Jakobi, a former functionary in the *Bund Deutscher Mädel*, demonstrates. Her «Juchtengeruch» reminds him of «Marschkolonnen» and even her shoes, lined up orderly in her room, evoke somewhat titillating images of fascist submission (*Wolfshaut* 153).

In addition to functioning as a «cultural-critical metadiscourse» in its imaginative and critical retelling of Austrian soldiers’ criminal actions during World War II, *Die Wolfshaut* uncritically communicates the long shadow
of a soldierly masculine identity construction via its «extratextual» (Iser 216) references to the misogynist «male fantasies» (Theweleit) of post-World War I soldiers. These disturbing attitudes do not cancel out the ethical challenge posed by Die Wolfshaut’s literary remembering of Austrian soldiers as war criminals. Rather, they are yet another element of the «uncharted regions of the prevailing culture» (Iser) and of what Zapf describes as the «complexity of those inner landscapes of the mind» («Ecocriticism» 138) that become visible through literature.

Re-reading Die Wolfshaut in an ecocritical context offers several new perspectives on the novel and the discourse of Austrian postwar memory. First, as I demonstrated in my analysis of nature through Iser’s concept of «literary anthropology,» Die Wolfshaut recovers the imaginative force of the natural and the organic from its appropriation by reactionary ideologies. While Lebert’s novel does not let go completely of the opportunity to portray the peasant lifestyle in the rural region of southern Styria as a manifestation of what Adorno called the «Brutalität des Rustikalen,» nature and its underlying processes ultimately become forces of resistance against the ideological manipulation of memory by the former perpetrators. This is an important shift in perspective compared to traditional literary history, which predominantly analyzed literary representations of rural villages as depictions of anti-enlightened communities (Kummer 9). As a consequence, nature, in its functions as marker of a specific place and as synonym for the larger ecological system, appears freed from the discursive corset that identified the natural and the organic solely as suspicious leftovers of the National Socialist blood-and-soil ideology (Goodbody, Kindle Loc. 1599).

Second, the novel’s re-appropriation of the natural for a critique of reactionary ideologies mirrors the literary text’s own role as «ecological agent» in the larger context of cultural ecology, of which cultural memory is an important element. It is an affirmation of humanity’s connection to nature and forms the basis for the ethical vision offered in the reflection of the veteran Karl Maletta. In all analyses of Die Wolfshaut that I am aware of, Maletta’s war crime and his later reflection on it fall by the wayside. The easily recognizable structure of the detective novel, centered around the sailor Johann Unfreund’s attempts to solve the crime and arrest the criminals, entices critics to focus on the comparison between an obstinate village community’s refusal to accept responsibility for their crimes and postwar Austrian society’s long-standing culture of forgetting. Since the criminals remain unpunished and the hero, sailor Unfreund, eventually leaves the village in a somewhat compromised fashion, Die Wolfshaut seems to offer a highly resignative view of history and also of the discourses of memory.
Maletta’s self-critical evaluation of his failure to be truly human at a crucial moment in his life offers a hopeful counterpoint insofar as it connects humanity with nature in a decisively non-Social Darwinistic – and also anti-fascist – reading. As I show here, Maletta’s act of remembering is closely connected to an affective, emotional, and imaginative perception of nature. By highlighting this sort of nature perception in opposition to the exploitative and technocratic view of nature by the other villagers, especially the perpetrators, Die Wolfshaut emphasizes the more-than-symbolic link between the ecological principles of nature and the function of literature as ecological agent with the potential to restore the richness, diversity, and complexity of those inner landscapes of the mind, which make up the cultural ecosystems of modern humans, but are threatened by impoverishment by an increasingly over economized, standardized, and depersonalized contemporary world» (Zapf, «Cultural Ecology» 138).

My focus on the story of the traumatized ex-soldier Maletta’s crime as key to a renewed look at the process of memory in Die Wolfshaut must not be understood as a total rejection of those readings of the novel that view the events in the village of Schweigen as a literary critique of the repression of memory in postwar Austrian society. Rather, my hope is that the different perspective on the supposedly irrational and metaphysical perceptions of nature by one of the novel’s protagonists can provide a model for a broader and more nuanced discussion of the contradictory and complex processes of memory beyond an anthropocentric focus on human psychoanalytic processes.

Notes

I would like to thank Barbara Drescher for several helpful discussions that shaped my argument in decisive ways. I am also indebted to the editors of this special issue of Colloquia Germanica, Caroline Schaumann and Heather Sullivan, whose critical questions and productive comments on earlier versions of this text have helped me to sharpen the argument.

1 For brief but informative references about Lebert’s influence on Elfriede Jelinek’s Kinder der Toten and Christoph Ransmayr’s Morbus Kitahara see Barrière. Karl Wagner offers a discussion of how Ransmayr’s Morbus Kitahara takes up and further develops Lebert’s nature metaphors («Das Gespenstische» 101). For a discussion of Lebert’s polemical nature descriptions as commentary on postwar Austrian politics see Reichmann.

2 Ignored by Austrian publishing houses, Lebert finally found a publisher in the Hamburg-based Claassen Verlag, where Die Wolfsbaut appeared in a small edition in 1960. Only 30 years later did the novel find an Austrian publisher when it was republished by the Europa Verlag (Bushell 95).

3 Lebert escaped service in the Wehrmacht by feigning mental illness. He retreated to a remote alpine village, where he lived for most of the war; he left his retreat for only a
few appearances on the stage (Egyptien 26–28). For more biographical information see chapter one of Egyptien.

4 In the words of Jürgen Egyptien: «Hans Leberts Methode des Transparentismus zielt [...] auf die ästhetische Konstellierung der Transzendenz im Diesseits, deren Phänomenalität das sinnliche Einzelne durchsichtig macht für die in ihm und durch es wirkenden Kräfte» (273).

5 Literary historian Karl Müller views the novel as a reflection of Lebert’s occupation with Gnosticism («Neuer Gegenstand»).

6 How problematic Lebert’s use of Wagner motifs was for some critics is noticeable in the biting irony of their criticism: «Die Methode von Leberts Wagner-Recycling ist offenkundig folgende: Man gehe ins Nibelungenring-Depot und hole sich die Requisiten und Helden, die man braucht, und dichte sie weiter» (Aigner 144–45).

7 Other scholars who read Lebert’s text as comment on historico-political events and not as philosophical or religious treatment of evil are Barrière, Bushell, Strigl, and Wagner.

8 It is against such external points of reference that Wolfgang Iser argues in his search for literature’s unique contribution to anthropological knowledge (Iser 211).

9 Coincidentally, «Holzwege» is also the title of a collection of essays by Martin Heidegger. While there is no direct reference to Heidegger in Lebert’s novel or in his biographical notes, my interpretation of this passage in Lebert’s novel as illustrative of a rejection of the reductive appropriation of nature by reactionary ideologies finds affirmation in this associative reference to Heidegger’s text.

10 For instance, the names of the hunter, Habergeier, and the saw mill operator, Schreckenschläger, are not just ironic references to their professions but carry a negative connotation. For more on the multilayered meanings of last names in the novel see Long 88; Caputo-Mayr 84; Fliedl and Wagner 310.

11 Zapf draws on Gregory Bateson’s process-based understanding of the mind as well as on Peter Finke’s systems theory to develop his notion of «cultural ecology.» For the most detailed version of his ideas, see Zapf’s Literatur als kulturelle Ökologie. For this article I used English-language publications by Zapf, especially the essays «Literary Ecology and the Ethics of Texts» and «Ecocriticism, Cultural Ecology, and Literary Studies.» For the connection between Iser’s concept of literary anthropology and cultural ecology see Müller, «From Literary Anthropology to Cultural Ecology.»

12 As Zapf summarizes: «The awareness and recognition of the alterity of the other can be seen as an essential characteristic of the recent discourse of ethics, and narrative seems to be a form in which this discourse can find a specifically instructive, because complex, medium of (self-exploration)» ( «Literary Ecology» 854).

13 In this context it is interesting to consider Immanuel Kant’s discussion of smell as an «organic sensation» that might provide «pleasure of enjoyment» but constitutes an inferior method of perceiving one’s surroundings compared to a «rationalizing contemplation» (Kant 175–76). I am indebted to Heather Sullivan for pointing out this connection.

14 As Henry Friedlander writes, «zebra uniforms [gestreifte Kleider]» were used for concentration camp prisoners designated in «killing centers» (149). Historian Daniel Blatman describes how during the death marches at the end of World War II, German youths shouted from the windows «Wir gehen auf Jagd, um die Zebras abzuschließen» (313).

15 Daniela Strigl highlights that the «Individualismus des Anarchisten» appears to be Lebert’s main force of resistance against the totalitarian ideology of National Socialism (141).
Zapf draws on Derrida to make the point that philosophy is at a disadvantage compared to literature here, «because the latter offers the possibility of opening the text to the perspective of «the animal» while remaining aware of its incommensurability» («Literary Ecology» 855). See also Jacques Derrida, «The Animal That Therefore I am (More to Follow),» trans. David Wills, Critical Inquiry 28.2 (2002): 372; quoted in Zapf, «Literary Ecology» 855.

17 This connection of female sexuality with fascism and dirty nature appears in even more disturbing ways in Lebert’s second novel, Der Feuerkreis (1971). For a discussion of images of non-fertile and deserted nature and their connection to the bible, see Nash 13. I thank Caroline Schaumann for pointing me to this connection.

18 References to the smell of women’s armpits range from ironic depiction – «dort, wo selbst große Drogisten und Chemiker scheitern» (Wolfshaut 86) – to biting caricature, for instance when Erna Eder, a would-be filmstar, enters the restaurant: «Dann klappte eine Tür, und ein scharfer Geruch nach Zwiebeln durchzog das Lokal» (197).

19 Karl Müller refers to Kurt Arrer’s dissertation «Hans Lebert und der problematisierte Regionalroman» (1975) as the only scholarly work that has drawn attention to the fact «daß der Autor [Lebert] selbst nicht frei von rassistischen Tendenzen [sei]. Es handelt sich um eine nicht reflektierte Affinität» (Arrer 116; quoted in Müller, «Neuer Gegenstand» 58). Problematic is Egyptien’s discussion of this point: While acknowledging Lebert’s obsession with the allegedly dirty sexuality of the female body, Egyptien nonetheless writes of Lebert’s deep «penetration» of female sexuality – «Lebert dringt tief ins Geheimnis weiblicher Sexualität [ein]» (Egyptien 142) – without reflecting on the gendered implications of Lebert’s perspective nor on the phallic connotations of his own use of language.


21 For more on Die Wolfshaut in the Kontext of the Heimatroman genre see Kummer and Rossbacher.

Works Cited


