

# literatur für leser

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## Herder's *Kritische Wälder*: A Vegetal Topography of Critique

Johann Gottfried Herder's *Kritische Wälder* [*Critical Forests*] capture the project of literary critique in an apparent oxymoron. The title of the essay compilation (containing altogether four diminutive forests or *Wäldchen*) features vegetative life [*Wälder*] alongside discourse [*Kritik*], which, in the eighteenth century as much as today, is generally regarded as the opposite of what is "natural." Against readings that understand Herder's vegetal poetological metaphors as essentialist "fictions"<sup>1</sup> of immediate cultural production, I argue that Herder's *Kritische Wälder* (1769) enact a materialist meta-theory of literary criticism that is modeled after the organizational form of the forest, in conversation with eighteenth-century *Forstbotanik*. Herder's notion of *Kritische Wälder* challenges the paradigm of the critic as "weeder" prevalent in eighteenth-century hermeneutics, whose task it is to cultivate a critical literary discourse through the removal of improper readings. The *Wälder*, in contrast, envision *Kritik* as an interdependent cycle of productive overgrowth, accumulation, and decay, *Zufall* being the condition of its vitality. Taking Herder's model of *Kritik* as a central case in point, my reading relates the shift from philological to speculative criticism around 1800 to concurrent developments in *Forstbotanik*. I show how Herder responds to central questions of the *Forstbotanik* of his era, suggesting, as he does, that forests are functioning systems. On a different level, my argument also contributes to the histories of genius and the organic work of art, illustrating intersubjective and materialist facets of the concepts. I make my argument, first, by situating Herder's *Kritische Wälder* in the context of visions of the proper forest in eighteenth-century *Forstbotanik* and hermeneutics and, second, by highlighting the concrete composition of Herder's text as a collection and recycling of discarded materials from former projects.

### Tree and Forest in Eighteenth-Century *Forstbotanik* and Hermeneutics

The terminology of the textual forest has a long literary tradition. As a poetological trope, it originates in the writings of the first-century Roman poet Publius Papinius Statius, whose book of occasional poetry bears the title *Sylvae*, meaning both "forest" and "raw material." Traces of the *lyrical or poetic forest* would later appear in neo-Latin poetry of late antiquity (Ausonius, Claudianus, Sidonius Appollinaris), in Italian poetry of the Middle Ages (Angelo Poliziano), and in the seventeenth-century German poetry of Martin Opitz, Ulrich von Holstein, Paul Fleming, and Georg Neumark.<sup>2</sup> Wolfgang Adam, in his seminal study of the topic, characterizes *sylvae* as an umbrella term for textual corpora that contain materials without any clearly determined topic and

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1 Wolfgang Adam: *Poetische und kritische Wälder. Untersuchung zu Geschichte und Formen des Schreibens 'bei Gelegenheit.'* Heidelberg: Carl Winter 1988, p. 256.

2 Ibid., pp. 18-20.

form. Their character, in other words, is fundamentally collective.<sup>3</sup> When considering Herder's use of the term as a title for one of his own works, it is important to note that *sylvae* was a largely forgotten genre, known only to those closely familiar with antique and baroque poetry in the mid-eighteenth century. By introducing his own form of textual forest, Herder is therefore, on the one hand, invoking a long literary past. On the other hand, however, he is presenting his readers with a novel variation on the traditional form: The *lyrical* or *poetic* forest becomes a *critical* forest. The historical genre of *sylvae* is transplanted into the "age of critique."<sup>4</sup>

The ascription of vegetal imagery to cultural processes is common around 1800. In Germany, it is made popular by Edward Young's notion of the original work of art, which, in Young's words, "may be said to be of a *vegetable* nature, it rises spontaneously from the vital root of genius; it *grows*, it is not *made*."<sup>5</sup> Young's concept of vegetal genius figures the role of author and artist as that of an ingenious "medium" who merely channels natural processes. From the standpoint of recent scholarship, such a naturalization of art would constitute an essentialist fiction, in denial of the historical and material conditions at work in cultural production.<sup>6</sup> According to this logic, Herder's *Wälder* would even amplify essentialist tendencies in Young's vegetalization of genius, by extending vegetal genesis into the reflective activity of *Kritik*. Echoing Young, Herder declares that the *Wälder* are insulated from the synthesizing power of the author. "Der Wald," he writes, "hat keinen Namen,"<sup>7</sup> reflecting his decision to publish the text anonymously. "In mehr als einer Sprache," he adds in the conclusion to his first "Wäldchen," "hat das Wort *Wälder* den Begriff von gesammelten Materialien ohne Plan und Ordnung."<sup>8</sup> This evokes the twofold meaning of the latin *sylvae* and the Greek *ύλη* as both forest/woodland and material/matter. In other words, Herder attributes to his criticism a vegetal form, owing to an internal organization of material that he associates with the notion of a forest. However, given the intentional authorial and editorial processes underlying the composition of the *Wälder*, stressing their auto-poiesis seems inaccurate, even absurd. Wolfgang Adam, in a reading that is representative of the *Wälder*'s scholarly reception to date, sees a "Fiktion der planlosen Präsentation von ungeordneten Materialien"<sup>9</sup> at work in Herder's description of the composition of *Kritische Wälder*.

A look at eighteenth-century understandings of the collective unity of forests sheds light on Herder's notion of autopoietic criticism. Indeed, the epistemic importance that botany, and especially *Forstbotanik*<sup>10</sup>, would hold by the mid- to late-eighteenth

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3 Ibid., p. 15.

4 "Unser Zeitalter ist das eigentliche Zeitalter der Kritik." See Immanuel Kant: *Kritik der reinen Vernunft, erste Ausgabe* [1781]. In: *Gesammelte Schriften*. Band 4. Ed. by Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften. Berlin: Georg Reimer 1903, pp. 3-253, here p. 9.

5 Edward Young: *Conjectures on Original Composition* [1759]. Manchester: Manchester University Press 1918, p. 7.

6 See, for instance, Helmut Schneider: "Nature." In: *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*. Ed. by Marshall Brown. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000, pp. 92-114, esp. pp. 92-95.

7 Johann Gottfried Herder: *Werke*. Band 2. Frankfurt a.M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag 1993, p. 245.

8 Ibid. Emphasis in the original.

9 Adam: *Poetische und kritische Wälder*, p. 256. My emphasis.

10 This is evidenced, for instance, in botanist Candidus Huber's suggestion from 1791, that "heut zu Tage die Botanik, besonders Forstbotanik, theils wegen der angenehmen Naturkunde, größtentheils aber wegen der ökonomischen Nutzenwendung faßt zum allgemeinen Lieblingstudium geworden ist." Candidus Huber:

century suggests that Herder's forest imagery should be taken more literally than it generally has been. As Albrecht von Haller puts it in 1761,

Die Botanik hebt [...] ihr Haupt über alle Wissenschaften empor; sie ist nicht nur der Vollkommenheit selbst am nächsten, sie hat nicht nur nach und nach der Natur fast alle ihre Klassen und Ähnlichkeiten abgeraten, sondern sie hat dem ganzen Naturreich ihre Lehrart mitgeteilt.<sup>11</sup>

In this vein, Herder's works from the 1760s and 1770s bear ample marks of the influence of botanical theory, as the extant scholarship has well explored. Herder's *Kritische Wälder* in particular, however, have received surprising little treatment in this regard.

Typically, when approached through the lens of historical epistemology, arboreal and sylvaeen imagery is not differentiated from that of other vegetal or organicist metaphors. It is important to note, though, that in eighteenth-century botany, tree and forest play a role quite distinct from other vegetal forms. The increasing interest in trees as scientific objects around this time evinces a paradigm shift in methodologies of classification. In his theory of the metamorphosis of plants, the French botanist Joseph Pitton de Tournefort had argued that the blossom is the final stage and climax of vegetative development, concluding that it contains the plant's essence. This position was later endorsed by Linnaeus, and found a parallel in eighteenth-century rhetoric, where the language of fruits and blossoms is typically used to describe an artwork's true and final, aesthetic quality and beauty.<sup>12</sup> But other schools of classification, following the English botanist John Ray, developed taxonomies that included the vegetative (stocks, leaves, trunks) as well as the generative (flowers, blossoms, stamens) parts of the plant.<sup>13</sup> With this ascendance of morphological criteria in botanical taxonomies, trees – whose flowering parts do not have the "striking" character with reference to which Tournefort had justified his sole focus on a plant's generative parts<sup>14</sup> – took on a significance they had not previously had. Similarly rising in poetological importance around 1800 and reflecting this shift in botanical methodology, the images of the tree and the forest would replace the dominant idea of works of art as beautiful products with the idea that art is a continuous morphological process.

This turn can be observed in a correspondence between Herder and his mentor Johann Georg Hamann in 1766. Hamann responds to a manuscript of Herder's *Fragment über neuere deutsche Literatur*, (published in 1767), writing: "mit der Ordnung, dem Reichthum, der Schönheit des Entwurfes sowohl als der Ausführung bin ich im Ganzen zufrieden, und freue mich über den Schatz der Einsichten und Einfälle,

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"Ankündigung einer natürlichen Holz-Bibliothek." In: *Journal für das Forst- und Jagdwesen*. Dritten Bandes, erste Hälfte. Leipzig: Siegfried Leberecht Crusius 1792, pp. 221-226, here p. 221.

11 Albrecht von Haller: "Vom Nutzen der Hypothesen." In: *Tagebuch seiner Beobachtungen über Schriftsteller und über sich selbst*. Band 2. Ed. by Albrecht von Haller. Bern: Hallersche Buchhandlung 1787, p. 109.

12 See Douglas Lane Patey: "The Institution of Criticism in the Eighteenth Century." In: *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*. Volume 4. Ed. by Hugh Barr Nisbet a. Claude Rawson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005, pp. 3-31, here p. 9.

13 See Georg Töpfer: *Historisches Wörterbuch der Biologie. Geschichte und Theorie der biologischen Grundbegriffe*. Band 3. "Systematik." Stuttgart: Metzler 2016, pp. 445-446.

14 Tournefort justified his focus on the generative part of the plants for his system of classification with the claim they would be more "striking" and thus more appropriate. See *ibid.*, p. 577.

der Keime, Blüten und Früchte.”<sup>15</sup> Here Hamann draws upon the established eighteenth-century rhetorical image of fruit and blossom as signifiers of aesthetic quality of the final product. Yet Hamann is also critical of Herder’s style in a separate letter from the same year: “der Stil [ist] an einigen Stellen zu pétillant, und die periodische Form durch Fragen, Ausuferungen, Interjectionen gar zu zerrissen.”<sup>16</sup> In his response, Herder attempts to beat Hamann at his own vegetal game, recasting the blossom as merely one element of a tree among others. For Herder, it is precisely what Hamann praises about Herder’s work – its flowers and fruits – that justifies his making use of an unconventional style. “Die Anmerkungen, die Sie über meine Schreibart säen, sollen auf ein gutes Laub fallen,” he acknowledges, but defends his style nonetheless:

Meine Studien sind wie Zweige, die durch Ungewitter *mit einmal* ausgetrieben worden: meine Gedichte gehören zur Zeit des hohen Stils, der sich plötzlich aus dem Chaos empor schwang, und die Gratie noch nicht kannte; aber wissen Sie auch, daß ich noch nicht im Alter der *Reife*, sondern der *Blüthe* bin: eine jede hält eine ganze Frucht in sich, aber viele fallen freilich auf die Erde. Wollen Sie an einem jungen Baum lieber abschneiden, oder einpfropfen. Spomen Sie mich an, vieles zu entwerfen; nicht aber, als Autor vor die Ewigkeit ausführen zu wollen.<sup>17</sup>

Herder’s vegetal imagery is plentiful: critique is “seeded” [*säen*] onto “fertile leaves” [*gutes Laub*]. Herder himself is “not ripe” [*unreif*], but rather a “young tree” [*junger Baum*]. His written works, by contrast, are “like branches that have suddenly sprouted after a storm” [*wie Zweige, die durch Ungewitter mit einmal ausgetrieben worden*]. Herder’s imagery takes Hamann’s fruit references in a direction the latter did not intend for them. For Hamann, “blossom” and “fruit” equally stand for an aesthetic bounty at the end of a causal chain. Hamann’s nature is here a *natura naturata*. For Herder, the blossom, appearing earlier in the reproductive process, can be likened to an unripe apple. Flower and fruit mark different stages along the same path of organic development – neither is an end unto itself.

Herder’s notion of an arborous writing technique parallels the increasing attention to morphological criteria in eighteenth-century botany in striking ways. Above and beyond, his aesthetics of productive dropping and decay thinks vegetal and literary development as interdependent cycle rather than a linear process. According to Herder’s view, blossoms, like manuscript drafts, will fall unfertilized to the ground, but in turn become the fertile soil [*gutes Laub*] required by all new growth, including Hamann’s own criticism. According to this logic, many blossoms must fall unfertilized for the production of one single fruit, just as many drafts must be cast aside for a successful manuscript to emerge. Unfertilized and overabundant, decaying blossoms are not ugly rejects, but an integral part of the tree’s vitality, just as unsuccessful drafts are an integral element of the work [*Studie*], which in this sense always exceed the final, published text. That Herder’s approach ascribes a materialistic and not a merely conceptual core to the creative process becomes apparent with an eye to the metonymic relations of *Blatt* to *Blatt* [leaf to page] and *Buch* to *Buche* [book to beech] in the German language, which Herder seems to highlight with the analogies

15 Johann Georg Hamann: “An Herder, nach Riga. Mietau, den 24. März 1766.” In: *Hamanns Schriften*. Band 3. Ed. by Friedrich Roth. Berlin: Reimer 1822, pp. 352-353, here p. 353.

16 Hamann: “An Herder, Mietau 1766.” In: *Hamanns Schriften*. Band 3, pp. 359-361, here p. 360.

17 Johann Gottfried Herder: “Herder to Hamann, Riga, Juli 1766.” In: *Briefe*. Band 1. April 1763-April 1771. Ed. by Wilhelm Dobbek a. Günter Arnold. Weimar: Böhlau 1977, pp 45-47, here p. 46. Emphasis by Herder.

he draws between drafts and petals.<sup>18</sup> According to this understanding, the common basis for Herder's analogies between futile (but potentially productive) written drafts and unfertilized (but potentially fertile) blossoms is the formation, literal in each case, of abundant piles of seemingly useless material.

For all the congruence between Herder's work in the 1760s and 1770s and eighteenth-century *Forstbotanik*, Herder's treatment of tree and forest also at times diverges from the emerging botanical consensus of his time. One such point of divergence is Herder's focus, in one of the passages from *Kritische Wälder* cited above, upon the *material* aspect of the forest, recalling the twofold meaning of *sylvae* as both forest and material. "In mehr als einer Sprache," Herder writes in the conclusion to the first "Wäldchen," "hat das Wort *Wälder* den Begriff von gesammelten Materialien ohne Plan und Ordnung."<sup>19</sup> The increasing shortage of firewood in mid-eighteenth-century Western Europe went along with an emergent realization that these scarcities were caused by excessive clear-cutting and the destruction of "Wiederwachs," or naturally grown young trees. The forest progressively attracted interest as more than the sum of its individual trees: it came to be seen as a complex organizational principle, constituted by a multitude of forest-dwelling organisms and species as well as environmental factors. Hans Carl von Carlowitz's *Sylvicultura Oeconomica* (1713) – which articulated one of the first strong arguments against clearcutting and in favor of "sustainable" [*nachhaltende*] forestry – was a pivotal text in this regard.<sup>20</sup> Carlowitz offered a proto-ecological model of the forest as system, attending to the co-habitation of individual trees and plants in relation to climate, soil, and animal life. With Carlowitz, the prevailing view of forests as deposits of material resources began to be replaced by the notion that humans ought to engage in harmonious development and maintenance of the forest-whole. Against this background, Herder's approach to the forest as a collection of material seems, at first glance, provocative and questionable – perhaps even ecologically regressive.

Even so, we can better understand Herder's materialist account of the forest by highlighting the paradox that *Forstbotanik* had created for itself by the mid-eighteenth-century with its vision of a forest-whole. With the emergence in Carlowitz of the idea of a harmonious forest-whole as more than the sum of its parts, the forest, though appreciated as a living system, was no longer considered self-sustainable. The deliberate study and protection of forests by human beings now becomes a requirement. This change is apparent in one of the most internationally influential approaches to forests of the eighteenth century developed by Georges-Louis Buffon and the botanic school of the *Jardin du Roi* that he directed. This school observed the reproduction, life cycles, and co-habitation of trees in a systematic and empirical way. Buffon's detailed account of different tree species in the *Histoire Naturelle*, along with multiple independent treatises on the practice and benefits of forestry produced under his direction, were a product of the tree breeding experiments that Buffon conducted on the royal tree farm. Like many of his contemporaries, Herder – introduced to Buffon by

18 As Friedrich Kittler has observed, "the rhetorician's metonymy, 'leaf/leaf', was taken literally in the writing systems of 1800." *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*. Stanford: Stanford University Press 1990, p. 85.

19 Herder: *Werke*, Band 2, p. 245. Emphasis in the original.

20 Hans Carl von Carlowitz: *Sylvicultura Oeconomica, oder Hausswirthliche Nachricht und Naturmässige Anweisung zur Wilden Baum-Zucht*. Leipzig: Braun 1713, p. 106.

Kant in the early 1760s – was profoundly impressed by Buffon’s unorthodox empirical methodology, which starkly contrasted with the methods of more traditional French schools.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, Buffon’s view of the forest includes a twofold evaluative vision that is both in tension with itself and distinct from the perspective Herder would develop in *Kritische Wälder*. On the one hand, Buffon’s work inaugurates one of the earliest conservationist efforts to confront the large-scale deforestation of the European continent. On the other hand, Buffon actually advocated for the deforestation of large areas of the “new world,” and he proposed replacing old-growth forests with heavily managed second-growth plantations.

Buffon’s dismissive view of old-growth forest is nowhere articulated more clearly than in the introduction to the *Histoire Naturelle*. The following passage was translated into German by Georg Forster for his Kassel lectures in the early 1770s, though it had already been circulating widely in French by that point:

Er selbst [der Mensch] verschönert die Natur, er bauet, erweitert, verfeinert. Er rottet Disteln und Dornen aus, pflanzt Weinstöcke und Rosen an ihre Stätte. Dort liegt ein wüster Erdstrich, eine traurige, von Menschen nie bewohnte Gegend, deren Höhen mit dichten schwarzen Wäldern überzogen sind. Bäume ohne Rinde, ohne Wipfel, gekrümmt, oder vor Alter hinfällig und zerbrochen, andere in noch weit größerer Zahl, an ihrem Fuße hingestreckt, um auf bereits verfaulten Holzhaufen zu modern, – ersticken und vergraben die Keime, die schon im Begriff waren, hervorzubrechen [...] zwischen diesen Morästen und den verjährten Wäldern auf der Höhe, liegt eine Art Heiden und Gräseren, die unseren Weiden in nichts ähnlich sind. Die schlechten Kräuter wachsen dort über die guten weg und ersticken sie. Es ist nicht der feine Rasen, den man den Flaum der Erde nennen könnte, nicht eine beblümete Aue, die ihren glänzenden Reichtum von fernher verkündigt, es sind rauhe Gewächse, harte, stachelige, durcheinander geschlungene Kräuter, die nicht sowohl fest gewurzelt als unter sich verwirrt zu sein scheinen, nach und nach verdorren, einander verdrängen, und eine grobe, dichte, und mehrere Schuhe dicke Watte bilden. Keine Straße, keine Gemeinschaft, nicht einmal die Spur von einem vernünftigen Wesen zeigt sich in dieser Wüsteney.<sup>22</sup>

For Buffon, untouched nature is useless and ugly, and requires human intervention to render it either beautiful [*Rosen*] or useful [*Weinstöcke*]. Only human intervention can elevate the status of nature above that of mere material. Buffon believed to be demonstrating the superiority of cultivated second nature by what he regards as the pitiful state of the old-growth forest. With its topography of pits and mounds [*an ihrem Fuße hingestreckt*] and its decaying ground layer [*um auf bereits verfaulten Holzhaufen zu modern*], the old-growth forest is described as malfunctioning [*ersticken und vergraben die Keime, die schon im Begriff waren, hervorzubrechen*]. To Buffon, it is emblematic of a notion of nature that is essentially self-destructive. Buffon is often considered a vitalist counterpoint to mid-eighteenth-century mechanism: For him, nature itself is vital and contingent, rather than strictly mechanical and determined by external laws.<sup>23</sup> Yet, as the passage above shows, it is precisely the contingency of nature that justifies human control over it. “La nature brute est hideuse et mourante;

21 Buffon would be an important influence on Herder’s later *Ideen* in particular, even though Herder was familiar with his work from the earliest stages of his writing. Eugen Sauter: *Herder und Buffon*. Rixheim: Sutter & CIE 1910, p. 91. This sustained influence is, for instance, clearly articulated in Herder’s *Thomas Abbt’s Schriften* (1768). See also John Zammito, who argues that Buffon was crucial for the development of Herder’s anthropological approach in *Kant, Herder, and the Birth of Anthropology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2002.

22 Georg Forster: *Werke*. Band 2. Ed. by Gerhard Steiner. Frankfurt a.M.: Insel 1967, pp. 29-30.

23 See, for instance, Peter H. Reill: *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.



c'est moi, moi seul qui peux la rendre agréable et vivante," he states in 1764.<sup>24</sup> By the mid- to late-eighteenth century, the emerging consensus is that the forest's wild growth requires continuous human maintenance in order for its self-organization to function and flourish. This maintenance consists primarily of the removal of unnecessary, accidental material.

Buffon's vision of the cultivated forest has a parallel in the English garden, which is typically associated with the aesthetic, political, and epistemological program of German classicism and idealism with its notion of the organicist work of art, and is therefore regarded as a counterpoint to the Baroque garden. The central rule for cultivated nature, as it appears in both the English garden and the cultivated forest, is the internal coherence and functionality of its parts, and an inner necessity defined as a lack of the accidental or *Zufall*. "Gärten in der wahren Bedeutung," Christian Hirschfeld writes in *Theorie der Gartenkunst*, his seminal 1775 work on the English garden, "erheben sich über den blinden Einfall [...] und folgen nur dem Zuruf der Vernunft."<sup>25</sup> Carlowitz, in a similar vein, dedicates a large chapter of *Sylvicultura Oeconomica* ("Von den schädlichen Zufällen") to techniques for avoiding what he considers to be the damaging, "accidental" elements of the forest, which do not, in this view, properly belong to it. Whereas there is room for debate in some cases, such as that of mosses<sup>26</sup>, many factors of the forest-system are distinctly "accidental," such as mistletoe or harsh weather, and must be removed or safeguarded against in order to sustain the forest's harmony.<sup>27</sup> This attitude will be echoed in the widely read *Zedler-Universal-Lexicon* a few years later, which advises readers to differentiate between essential and inessential elements of the forest.<sup>28</sup> Nature, read through eighteenth-century German models of the English garden or the cultivated forest, is idealized, characterized both by a supposed lack of external rules and by an inner harmony with reason. A lack of *Zufall* is the condition for a well-functioning relationship between the whole of nature and its parts.

Essentially, the merit of foresters is their capacity to differentiate between those elements that are essential and beneficial to the forest-whole and those that are inessential, damaging, or useless. This capacity of differentiation brings together the relation between *anthropos* and nature, expressed in eighteenth-century visions of *Forstbotanik*, and the relation between critic and artwork, expressed in eighteenth-century hermeneutics. Critics, Gottsched declared a few years prior to the publication of Herders *Wälder*,

24 Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon: "De la Nature, Première Vue." In: *Histoire Naturelle*. Volume 12. Paris: Imprimerie Royale 1764, p. 363.

25 Christian Cay Lorenz Hirschfeld: *Theorie der Gartenkunst*. Band. 1. Leipzig: Weidmann 1779, p. 156.

26 Von Carlowitz: *Sylvicultura Oeconomica*, p. 69.

27 Carlowitz counts the following elements amongst "schädliche Zufälle": strong wind, snow, drought, cold temperatures, moisture, sheet lightning, fog, grasshoppers, butterflies, caterpillars, deer, forest-fires, winter green and mismanaged logging (ibid., pp. 53-77). Carlowitz deems mosses harmful in some cases, but also acknowledges their protective function for tree bark (ibid., p. 69).

28 "Daß die Bäume sowohl als die menschlichen Leiber vielen Zufällen und Krankheiten unterworfen sind, solches ist bekannt genug [...] es hat uns aber die Natur Mittel genug gegeben, denselben entweder vorzubeugen, oder abzuhelfen, daher nun wenn solches von uns nicht geschieht, wir selbst die Verantwortung und dessen Schuld haben." See entry "Baum" in Johann Heinrich Zedler: *Zedler-Universal-Lexicon: Johann Heinrich Zedlers Grosses vollständiges Universal-Lexicon aller Wissenschaften und Künste*. Band. 3. Halle und Leipzig: Zedler 1732-1754, p. 735.

sind diejenigen Gelehrten, die sich auf die genauere Kenntniß der freyen Kuenste einlassen, ihre geheimsten Regeln inne haben, und daher im Stande sind, das Gute vom Boesen, das Richtige vom Falschen, so scheinbar es auch sein moechte, zu unterscheiden, und zu beurtheilen. Ihr Werk ist es also, die alten Schriftsteller recht zu erklæaren, die verderbten Stellen zu verbessern, und wider herzustellen.<sup>29</sup>

The quality of critics lies, on Gottsched's account, in their ability to differentiate between good and bad, correct and incorrect, damaging and beneficial. As the forester protects trees from parasitic, inessential plants, the effective critic preserves, protects, and recovers works of art from poor criticism. Even before the composition of Herder's *Wälder*, eighteenth-century *Forstbotanik* modeled hermeneutics along similar lines. *Kritik*, in this view, is analogous to landscape conservation.

Herder's contemporary critics objected not to his conception of criticism as forest, but rather to his favored form of forest management. Responding to the scathing review Herder had written of his work in *Wälder*, Christian Adolf Klotz retaliated by using his own vehicle of criticism – the *Deutsche Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften*. He condemned the *Kritische Wälder* as too speculative, too anecdotal, too interdisciplinary, and too unsubstantiated to count as *Wissenschaft*. In Klotz's view, Herder's many "errors" in the *Wälder* disqualify him as a critic: his overtly non-literal translations from the Greek and Latin, his many spelling mistakes, and his inaccuracy in recounting historical events.<sup>30</sup> Klotz formulates his disapproval by also drawing upon the imagery of the forest. At the beginning of his review, Klotz references the dedication [*Zuschrift*] found within Christian Gryphius' *Poetische Wälder* (1698), using this earlier text to lampoon Herder's 1769 work. "Gryphius," Klotz writes, "setzte folgende *Zuschrift* für sein Buch":

Hier stellet sich ein Wald in deinen Gränzen ein, / ---- der schlechte Stämme traget / Die Raupen, die sich fast an jedem Baum geleet, / Benehmen ihm das Laub, und weil es an dem Schein / Des hohen Himmels fehlt, so ists ein dürrer Hain, / In dem der Miswachs herrscht, und der nur Kiefern traget / In die fast jeden Tag ein schweres Wetter schläget, / Und also kann er Dir nicht recht gefällig sein.

Klotz then adds:

Kann etwas auf die herderischen Wälder wohl passender sein, als diese Beschreibung? Wahrhaftig ich bin schon seit einigen Tagen in diesen Wäldern herumgeirrt; das Geheule von Nachteulen und Uhus glaube ich gehört zu haben: allein sonst habe ich auch nichts gesehen als dürre Kiefern, Raupen, Spinnenweben, und verdorrte Äste.<sup>31</sup>

Herder's *Wälder*, in Klotz's account, exemplify the malfunctioning forest depicted by Buffon: They are ruled by "malformation" [*Miswachs*],<sup>32</sup> parasital infestation [*Raupen*, *Spinnenweben*], dead wood [*dürre Kiefern*], and a general inaccessibility for humans.

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29 Johann Christoph Gottsched: *Handlexicon oder Kurzgefaßtes Woerterbuch der schoenen Wissenschaften und freyen Kuenste. Zum Gebrauch der Liebhaber derselben herausgegeben von Johann Christoph Gottscheden*. Leipzig: Caspar Fritsch 1760, columns 461-462.

30 Christian Adolph Klotz: "Kritische Wälder, oder Betrachtungen über die Wissenschaft und Kunst des Schönen. Erstes und zweites Wäldchen." In: *Deutsche Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften*. Band 3. Ed. by *ibid*. Halle: Gebauer 1769, pp. 334-362. Klotz often signed his contributions with the abbreviation "VR," which is why the review is sometimes falsely attributed to an anonymous author.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 336. Klotz's omission reads "Hochwohlgeborener Herr" in Gryphius' text, referring to Balthasar Friedrich von Logau and Altendorf. Andreas Gryphius: *Poetische Wälder*. Der I. Theil. Breßlau und Leipzig: Bleßing 1718, title page.

32 Klotz: "Kritische Wälder," p. 336.

Gryphius' dedication addresses his sovereign, Balthasar Friedrich von Logau. The malfunctioning, dying forest serves as the backdrop of his dedication, which expresses hope that the forest will come back to life through von Logau's intervention: "Doch wenn sich nur ein Strahl von Deiner Güte zeigt / So wird der öde Wald / der merklich abgenommen / In gar geschwinder Frist zu neuen Kräften kommen."<sup>33</sup> By referencing Gryphius, Klotz suggests that Herder's forest lacks the authorial sovereignty needed to make both nature and text operational. Rather, Herder's forest is what Buffon had called dysfunctional "wild nature." In Klotz's view, Herder's criticism, like Buffon's "dying" old growth forest, has no means of keeping inessential elements in check.

### The Composition of *Kritische Wälder*

Over the course of his exchange with Klotz, Herder remarkably never disagrees with Klotz's claim that the *Wälder* are full of error, nor that they are full of malformations *per se*. His dispute with Klotz is grounded in a programmatic disagreement about the proper form of the forest. Klotz had asserted, "Ich merke, dass ich mich in diesen Wälder fast verirrt habe. Ich muss sehn, dass ich an meinen alten Ort zurückkommen kann, so schwer es auch wird, durch Dornen, Hecken und Disteln den Weg zu finden."<sup>34</sup> But Herder preempts this criticism in the *Wälder* themselves, using similarly analogous terms:

Doch ich vergesse aus meinem Kritischen Wäldern beinahe gänzlich den Rückweg. Wie habe ich in demselben umhergeirret! Wie verschiedenen Aussichten boten sich mir dar! Wie manchen richtigen und irrigen Gedanken mag ich auf meinem träumerischen Pfade gedacht haben! Es sei! Lessings Laokoon hat mir Materie zum Nachdenken verschaffet.<sup>35</sup>

Herder, drawing on the etymology of "irren" – which includes both "making a mistake" and "taking the wrong path" – approaches error in a positive way. Error becomes the condition for novelty and innovation, for change of perspective, and for true aesthetic experience. "The inventor," Herder states in a fragment from the same period (*Versuch einer Geschichte der lyrischen Dichtkunst*, from 1766), goes "for a walk, without intentions or with other purposes."<sup>36</sup> Once again, Herder emphasizes the role of contingency or *Zufälligkeit* in vital systems. Indeed, by rejecting the aesthetics of the cultivated forest, Herder celebrates *Zufälligkeit* as the key characteristic of his *Wälder*:

Was sind denn meine kritischen Wälder? Sie sind zufälliger Weise entstanden, und mehr durch die Folge meiner Lectüre, als durch die methodische Entwicklung allgemeiner Grundsätze angewachsen. Sie zeigen indessen, daß sich auch unsystematisch irren lasse, daß nicht bloß, wenn man aus ein paar angenommenen Worterklärungen, in der schönsten Ordnung, sondern auch, wenn man aus einigen ausgerißnen Stellen in der schönsten Unordnung alles, was man will, folgert, man dem Fehltritt gleich ausgesetzt bleibe.<sup>37</sup>

*Zufall* is the origin and the end of Herder's critical project. It is essential to both the genesis and the exemplary function [*sie zeigen indessen*] of the *Kritische Wälder*. In this passage, the *Wälder* appear to function as a control group in a larger experimental

<sup>33</sup> Gryphius: *Poetische Wälder*, title page.

<sup>34</sup> Klotz: "Kritische Wälder," p. 354.

<sup>35</sup> Herder: *Werke*. Band 2, pp. 242-243.

<sup>36</sup> Johann Gottfried Herder: *Sämtliche Werke*. Band. 32. Berlin: Weidmann 1899, p. 102.

<sup>37</sup> Herder: *Werke*. Band 2, p. 245.

setup, designed to demonstrate the necessity of failed attempts [*Fehlritte*] in the process of criticism.

Typically, as noted above, scholars have seen in Herder's dictum of *Zufälligkeit* an unachievable fictional unintentionality. Herder's very deliberate tackling of the project contradicts this notion, scholarship contends. Against this, and with an eye to the actual composition of the *Wälder*, I suggest that Wolfgang Adam's categorization of Herder's poetological program as a "Fiktion der planlosen Präsentation von ungeordneten Materialien"<sup>38</sup> is only partially correct. Herder wrote his four *Wäldchen* very fast – in less than a year.<sup>39</sup> Their "planlessness" is fictional in that Herder did plan early on to create – and then created – four diminutive "forests." It is not fictional, however, in so far as the *Wälder* emerge from a condition of disorganization and contingency that, for Herder, is intrinsic to the material processes of writing and publishing itself.

The publication of *Kritische Wälder* in 1769 was due to the fact Herder had accumulated a large amount of material by the summer of 1768. Herder incorporated fragments left over from the second part of his *Torso* on Thomas Abbt and from his revisions to the second of his *Fragmente* – remainders that did not fit easily into the texts from whose composition they emerged. It is in this sense that Herder's claim that the *Wälder* were written "ohne Plan" should be understood. Herder's account of the genesis of the *Wälder's* genesis highlights the discrepancy between thought and writing, initial intention and eventual use. But whereas German aesthetic theories around 1800 tend to celebrate the freedom of thought and bemoan its reduction in writing,<sup>40</sup> Herder takes this discrepancy to be a productive tension. For Herder, the scope of a written project reflects the overabundance of thought, producing a surplus of material which does not fit the project's initial limitations. Herder's treatment of Lessing in the *Wälder*, when initially composed, did not fit the content- and space-related bounds of his memorandum to the work of Thomas Abbt. In this sense, the limitations of any given written project ground the possibility of new projects. Herder's prior work had already acknowledged the fundamentally incomplete character of criticism, appearing, as it did, in the form of "Torso" and "Fragmente".<sup>41</sup> The *Kritische Wälder*, in turn, formalize this reflection: They demonstrate just how the material of one project carries over into another in an interdependent system of *Kritik*, drawing upon the vitality of residue.

Attending to the *Wälder's* compositional history as well as to the metonymical relations between *Blatt/Blatt* and *Buch/Buche* around 1800 allows for further conclusions regarding the function of allegory in Herder's notion of a critical forest. From this vantage point, the poetological image of the critical forest envisions criticism as an interdependent cycle, in which the literal accumulation of pages, lines, and letters originates from the limits of individual works and simultaneously constitutes them.

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38 Adam: *Poetische und kritische Wälder*, p. 256. My emphasis.

39 Herder began work on the *Wälder* in the summer of 1768. The first "Wäldchen" was in print, and the second ready to print in October of the same year. The third "Wäldchen" was completed by the end of 1768. The second and third "Wäldchen" were both published in January 1769, the third "Wäldchen" in the following summer. Herder wrote the fourth "Wäldchen" in January 1769, but never published it during his lifetime.

40 See Albrecht Koschorke's chapter on "Schriftliche Unmittelbarkeitsphantasien" in *Körperströme und Schriftverkehr. Mediologie des 18. Jahrhunderts*. München: Wilhelm Fink 2003, p. 206-208.

41 I am referring to Herder's *Über Thomas Abbts Schriften. Der Torso von einem Denkmal, an seinem Grabe errichtet* (1768) and his *Fragmente, als Beilagen zu den Briefen, die neueste Literatur betreffend* (1767).

According to this reading, the relation that Herder draws between *Kritik* and forest is not metaphorical, but of a metonymical nature. Herder's characterization of *Wälder* as "gesammelte Materialien" is the attempt to account for intersubjective and materialist facets of textual interpretation; facets that necessarily shape criticism beyond the critic's willful intent. The task of the critic and forester alike is hence not eliminated but becomes more clearly defined: It is the creation and preservation of an accidental variety which, whether successful or not, contributes necessarily to the system of criticism. This way, the critic and the forester are single factors amongst many in the material life cycle of the critical forest.

In conclusion, Herder's vision of vegetal critique does not pit "the unrefined ingenuity of natural expression against the 'false embellishments' of art and rhetoric,"<sup>42</sup> as previous readings of organicist trends in the eighteenth century suggest. With his notion of the critical forest, Herder does not attempt to eliminate mediacy but to foreground it. For Herder, the vegetal genius channels authorship not as a demiurgic force, but as a collaborative process reliant upon accident and materiality. By attending to this dimension of Herder's work, we respond to the call for a more differentiated look at the "cult of genius" so prevalent in the 1760s and 70s.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, Herder's *Kritische Wälder* offer a poetological take on the non-human natural world that is unique in its time. While prevailing eighteenth-century *Forstbotanik* embraces the properly cultivated forest as a natural whole that is more than its material elements, Herder privileges the materiality of the forest and, with this, appreciates the old-growth forest as a functioning system.

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<sup>42</sup> Schneider: "Nature," pp. 94-95.

<sup>43</sup> See for instance Cornelia Blasberg: "Werkstatt am 'Strom' oder: Das Dädalus-Syndrom: Produktionsphantasien im Göttinger Hain." In: *Kunst – Zeugung – Geburt. Theorien und Metaphern ästhetischer Produktion in der Neuzeit*. Ed. by Christian Begemann a. David Wellbery. Freiburg i.Br.: Rombach 2002, pp. 151-176.

