

# literatur für leser

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Literatur und Geologie

Herausgegeben von Jason Groves

Mit Beiträgen von Timothy Attanucci,  
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Erika Schellenberger-Diederich,  
Rochelle Tobias



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## Introductory Essay: Literature and Geology: An Inclination

This special issue of *literatur für lesler* considers the inclination of contemporary literature toward geology, as well as the inclination of geological writing toward literature and literary forms, particularly in the late eighteenth and early to mid-nineteenth centuries. It traces the contours of what could be called, after Paul Celan, the *Neigungswinkeln* or “angles of declination” of a constellation of writers toward the geologic. For Celan the vitality of literature can be measured by the degree to which a writer surmounts the artifice of art and speaks “unter dem Neigungswinkel seines Daseins, dem Neigungswinkel seiner Kreatürlichkeit.”<sup>1</sup> While the *Neigungswinkel* primarily refers to the “declination” of magnetic North (as given by a compass reading) from geographic North, a sense that is signaled by the title of his *Meridian* speech, it also refers to the “dip” or deviation of a stratum from the horizontal plane. In this way the term points to both a geodetic and a geologic aspect of self-understanding and literary production. Creatureliness is not only a matter of the human’s animality but also its minerality. The unique bent of one’s existence, and accordingly the unique bent of literature, is derived from personal as well as impersonal circumstances, deposited by both genealogical and geological forces. From Hölderlin to Handke and beyond, the writers explored in this issue commemorate this two-fold orientation that characterizes the event of literature for Celan.

The various inclinations and declinations articulated in this volume occur under the sign of a contemporary geologic turn in culture.<sup>2</sup> A recent and widely accepted proposal argues that human activity now constitutes an earth-magnitude geological force, one that is registered in the lithic archives that promise to outlast the species.<sup>3</sup> This emergent stratum, which indicates the novel geochronological episode in the history of the planet now informally known as the Anthropocene, constitutes a novel angle of declination, whose deposition may have begun already in the late eighteenth century. To write literature today—a geologic now that encompasses several centuries—is to commemorate this ongoing depositional event. If, as a literary critic recently put it, “collectively, we’re a hurtling hunk of rock that feels,” then it follows that such a geologic form of self-understanding will have consequences for “the stories we tell about our species and our place in life on Earth.”<sup>4</sup> While the contemporary literature in the mode of what Amitav Ghosh

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1 “[...] according to the angle of declination of his existence, the angle of declination of his creatureliness.” Paul Celan: *Der Meridian. Endfassung, Vorstufen, Materialien*. Eds. Bernhard Böschenstein/Heino Schull. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1999, p. 5. In the notes to *Der Meridian* where he speaks of the *Neigungswinkel*, Celan consistently associates the creaturely with the terrestrial: “Das Gedicht: ein terrestrisches, ein kretürliches Phänomen [*The poem: a terrestrial, a creaturely phenomenon*]” (55). I follow Rochelle Tobias in the translation of *Neigungswinkel* as “unique bent.” See Rochelle Tobias: *The Discourse of Nature in the Poetry of Paul Celan: The Unnatural World*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 2006.

2 See Elizabeth Ellsworth/Jamie Kruse: “Introduction: Evidence: Making a Geologic Turn in Cultural Awareness.” In: *Making the Geologic Now: Responses to Material Conditions of Contemporary Life*. Ed. Elizabeth Ellsworth/Jamie Kruse. New York: Punctum Books 2013, p. 6-12.

3 See Paul J. Crutzen: “Geology of Mankind.” In: *Nature* 415.3 (2002), p. 23.

4 Rob Nixon: “The Anthropocene: The Promise and Pitfalls of an Epochal Idea.” In: *The Edge Effects* (6 November 2014), available at <http://edgeeffects.net/anthropocene-promise-and-pitfalls/>.

and others term “petrofiction” increasingly narrates the incursion of the lithosphere into the sphere of human experience (and vice versa), it is equally true that writers have been contending with the entanglements between the human and the geologic at least since the Golden Age of Geology (ca. 1790-1820).

## To Open the Question

Opening the question of literature and geology perhaps inevitably recalls the question of literature and psychoanalysis posed by Shoshana Felman.<sup>5</sup> For Felman the seemingly neutral “and” that commonly unites the two disciplines in academic discourse belies a prevailing subordination of literature to the authority of psychoanalysis, in which the former, as object, is engaged in a quasi-Hegelian struggle for recognition by the latter, as subject. Instead of merely reversing these positions, Felman shows how the one is traversed by the other, and thus how the traditional *application* of psychoanalysis to literature must be revised into a mutual *implication*. These remarks remain salient for other literary conjugations. Though literature and geology cannot claim as intensive a relationship as literature and psychoanalysis, the entanglement of the former couple has an even more extensive history. It is a relationship structured less around literature’s struggle for recognition and authority and more around a series of mutual inclinations. To open the question of literature and geology today is to (re)open a wound, one in which psychoanalytic thought is also implicated.

As Timothy Attanucci discusses in his contribution to this volume, to the three great *Kränkungen* or “narcissistic wounds” to anthropocentrism that Freud announces in a 1917 essay—the cosmological humiliation wrought by Copernican heliocentrism and the resulting cosmic marginalization of the Earth; the biological humiliation wrought by Darwinism and the resulting evolutionary marginalization of the human species; and finally the psychological humiliation wrought by the topographic model of Freudian psychoanalysis and the resulting marginalization of consciousness in our psychic life—the paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould notably adds a fourth: a *geological* humiliation wrought by the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century discovery of the inhuman history of the Earth and the resulting temporal marginalization of human existence on a planet several billion years old.<sup>6</sup> This newfound vulnerability had been registered and acutely articulated already in the literature of the Age of Goethe, from the monstrous subterranean births recounted in Novalis’s *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, to the fatal mineral lures of Ludwig Tieck’s *Der Runenberg (Rune Mountain)* and E.T.A. Hoffmann’s *Die Bergwerke zu Falun (The Mines of Falun)*, to the untamed earth of Hölderlin’s late poetry, and beyond to the stories of Adalbert Stifter wherein the protagonists are mere

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5 Shoshana Felman: “To Open the Question.” In: *Yale French Studies* 55.6 (1977), p. 5-10.

6 Steven Jay Gould: *Time’s Arrow, Time’s Cycle. Myth and Metaphor in the Discovery of Geological Time*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard 1987, p. 2. See also Sigmund Freud: *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 12. 7<sup>th</sup> Edition. Frankfurt/M.: Fischer 2005, p. 3-12. Recognition of the deep history of the planet may be far more allochronic than is often assumed; see Ivan dal Prete: “‘Being the World Eternal.’ The Age of the Earth in Renaissance Italy.” In: *Isis*, 105.2 (June 2014), p. 292-317.

intrusions in the deep histories of an earth whose hazards they trepidatiously negotiate and falteringly narrate.<sup>7</sup>

If not yet a wound, for Freud the inorganic world nevertheless serves as a stumbling block for psychoanalysis, one that he takes up in texts ranging from *Die Traumdeutung* (*The Interpretation of Dreams*) and its stratigraphic models of the psyche to “Der Wahn und die Träume in W. Jensens *Gradiva*” (“Delusion and Dream in Jensen’s *Gradiva*”) and the traumatic repetition of volcanic catastrophe to *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*) and its introduction of the death drive to account for the apparent inclination of life toward an inorganic state. Yet the geologic self-understanding that occasionally outcrops in Freud’s thought extends well back to the nineteenth century. Though not discussed at length in this issue, Goethe’s literary speculation on the major geologic questions of his time looms large in what could be called the geologic imaginary of modernity.<sup>8</sup> As Andrew Piper has pointed out, Goethe’s collaboration in 1821 on the first geologic map of Germany, a work sharing with his contemporaneous novel *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* (*Wilhelm Meister’s Years of Wandering*) an interest in precipitous topographies, belonged to the larger verticalization of culture around 1800 that Foucault invokes in *The Order of Things*. Such representations, Piper argues, “popularized the notion of a ‘deep earth,’ whether spatially or temporally, and established the pictorial scene against which the deep self of Romanticism could define itself.”<sup>9</sup> This widely disseminated geologization of experience, modeled in the fiction of the Age of Goethe and developed through the psychoanalytic models of Freud and through contemporary artistic practice, may have been derived from the findings of the emerging earth sciences, but it has been elaborated extensively in literary and cultural production.

Following Gould, Georg Braungart has elaborated the myriad provocations that modern geology and geologic time pose to systems of knowledge and aesthetic sensibilities, while tracing out the methodological interrelation between the literary imagination and geoscientific reconstruction of the planet’s past. Drawing on Joseph Vogl’s notion of a *Poetologie des Wissens* or “poetology of knowledge,” Braungart’s work also attests to a procedural continuity between the two disciplines, one concisely summed up by Adelene Buckland in her assessment of the literary aspect of geology in the nineteenth century: “Doing geology meant writing it too.”<sup>10</sup> In so far as the literary text is no longer viewed as “a reiteration of knowledge produced somewhere else” or of an event that has already elapsed, Braungart’s geo-poetics also concurs with the latency of experience as discussed in trauma theory.<sup>11</sup> At its most extreme literary writing can be regarded as a further iteration of an ongoing geo-trauma—take for example

7 See Theodore Ziolkowski: “The Mine: Image of the Soul.” In: *German Romanticism and Its Institutions*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1990, p. 18-63.

8 For a discussion of inclinations toward the inorganic in the Age of Goethe see my article: “Goethe’s Petrofiction: Reading the *Wanderjahre* in the Anthropocene.” In: *Goethe Yearbook* 22.1 (2015), p. 95-113.

9 Andrew Piper: “Mapping Vision: Goethe, Cartography, and the Novel.” In: *Spatial Turns: Space, Place, and Mobility in German Literary and Visual Culture*. Ed. Jaimey Fisher/Barbara Mennel. Amsterdam: Rodopi 2010, p. 27-52, here p. 33.

10 Adelene Buckland: *Novel Science: Fiction and the Invention of Nineteenth-Century Geology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2014, p. 13.

11 Georg Braungart: “The Poetics of Nature: Literature and Geology.” In: *Inventions of the Imagination: Romanticism and Beyond*. Ed. Richard T. Gray/Nicholas Halmi/Gary J. Handwerk/Michael A. Rosenthal/Klaus A. Vieweg. Seattle: University of Washington Press 2011, p. 29.

the constellation consisting of the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79, Wilhelm Jensen's novella *Gradiva* (1902) and Freud's 1907 "Der Wahn und die Träume in W. Jensens *Gradiva*"—that registers itself in material inscriptions that include both ash and ink. In this way the literary works explored in this issue take up Cathy Caruth's invitation, posed at the close of *Literature in the Ashes of History*, to explore the archives of trauma where they extend beyond human history and into the catastrophic history of the earth.<sup>12</sup>

The account of the *Kränkung* given by Timothy Morton in *Hyperobjects* extends the entanglement of the human and the geologic by privileging the sense of a "humiliation" over that of an injury, and moreover in the literal sense of the human becoming *humus*: "being brought low, being brought down to earth."<sup>13</sup> While the figuration of the Copernican, Darwinian, and Freudian revolutions as "wounds" subtly maintains the anthropocentrism that was supposed to be critically injured, in Morton's gloss the geomorphic humiliation instead expresses the deep affinity between the human and its ontological Other. Recalling the literal and figurative descents into the earth which informed German Romanticism, Morton describes how ontology approaches, in the wake of this humiliation, a flat state where a conventional hierarchy of human, animal, vegetable, and mineral no longer obtains. The humiliating "quake in being" that *Hyperobjects* announces, however, is in many ways an *aftershock* emanating from the fictions of German Romanticism. Heather Sullivan, whose work is in many ways pioneering for the current issue, has explored how the presentation of the inorganic realm in Romantic literature consistently "undermines the certainty of distinguishing between the organic and the inorganic, and [...] renders the human body dangerously close to the minerals."<sup>14</sup>

## The Humiliation of Literature

The Romantic anxieties around the blurred distinction between the organic and inorganic has been reinvigorated by the recognition that human activity—to put it crudely—has unsettled the earth system to the extent that it has ushered in the new geological epoch tentatively known as the Anthropocene. (Not a few commentators have noted that this epithet seems to betray an anthropo-narcissism in denial of the Freudian *Kränkungen*.) More than just a mutual implication, today we can speak of the mutual *enrichment* of literature by geology and vice versa. I mean "enriched" first of all in the non-malignant sense of how language and literature have been augmented by a contemporary geological turn in culture, as glimpsed in the recent explosion of theory, genres, journals, exhibitions, lexica, curricula, and conferences contending with the Anthropocene.<sup>15</sup> Even as the Anthropocene diagnostic forecasts a radical decline of cultural and biological diversity, it is also punctuated by certain explosions: an intense

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12 Cathy Caruth: *Literature in the Ashes of History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 2013, p. 92.

13 Timothy Morton: *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2013, p. 18.

14 Heather Sullivan: "Organic and Inorganic Bodies in the Age of Goethe: An Ecocritical Reading of Ludwig Tieck's 'Rune Mountain' and the Earth Sciences." In: *ISLE* 10.2 (2003), p. 21-46.

15 See, for example, the forthcoming *Readings in the Anthropocene: The Environmental Humanities in German Studies and Beyond*. Ed. Sabine Wilke. Rochester: Bloomsbury (in press).

proliferation of writing and speech alongside the proliferating geologies of plastiglomerates, Fordites, and an emergent anthropogenic strata in the pedosphere.

But there is also a more malignant sense of enrichment, one that Celan alludes to in his 1958 speech delivered on the occasion of receiving the Bremen literature prize. In its most memorable passage the speech concerns the fate of language in a time of extinction.

Sie, die Sprache, blieb unverloren, ja, trotz allem.  
Aber sie mußte nun hindurchgehen durch ihre eigenen Antwortlosigkeiten, hindurchgehen durch furchtbares Verstummen, hindurchgehen durch die tausend Finsternisse todbringender Rede. Sie ging hindurch und gab keine Worte her für das, was geschah, aber sie ging durch dieses Geschehen. Ging hindurch und durfte wieder zutage treten, „angereichert“ von all dem.<sup>16</sup>

The passage of language through a time of darkness also entails the traumatic repetition of that darkness in and as language. The form of its return is what we could call a geo-logic of resilience: *zutage treten* is borrowed from mining vernacular and refers to the “outcropping” of a rock formation such as an ore. And if the form in which language makes its own resilience manifest, the outcrop, avails itself of a geologic figure, then this is also true of the content: “enrichment” broadly refers to the formation of mineral deposits, the increase in the proportion of a particular isotope in an element, and especially that of the isotope U-235 in uranium, so as to make that element more powerful or explosive. The enrichment of language entails its increased volatility. This form of enrichment is not always explicit and propositional but instead operates through a volatility of reference, evidenced in the audibility of *Reich* in the German *angereichert* (“enriched”), which unmistakably refers to the Third Reich and in this way to modern Germany’s imperial ambitions.

The two-fold humiliation of language and literature that Celan alludes to in 1958 also resonates in the main argument of environmentalist Bill McKibben’s *Eaarth* (2010). McKibben proposes to register the withdrawal of the familiarity of the earth as a home, habitat, and stable point of reference for environmental thought in a time of climate change—an event tied to the ongoing legacies of imperialism and colonialism—in an elemental accretion:

The world hasn’t ended but the world as we know it has—even if we don’t quite know it yet. We imagine that we still live back on that old planet, that the disturbances we see around us are the old random and freakish kind. But they’re not. It’s a different place. A different planet. It needs a new name. Eaarth. Or Monnde, or Terre Errde, *окучивать*.<sup>17</sup>

Like the Anthropocene epithet, “Eaarth” marks the profound and far-reaching transformations of a primary geophysical signifier. If to speak of the Earth in the Anthropocene is to speak of this ruptured reference, what does this mean for those stories in which we make sense of our place on the planet? What Jussi Parikka writes in *Geology of Media*—that the scale of geological durations exposed in the nineteenth century

16 Paul Celan: *Gesammelte Werke III*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1983, p. 185. “It, language, remained unlost, indeed, in spite of everything. But it had to pass through its own answerlessness, pass through frightful muting, pass through the thousand darkneses of deathbringing speech. It passed through and gave no words for that which happened; yet it passed through this happened. Passed through and could come to light again, ‘enriched’ by all that.”

17 Bill McKibben: *Eaarth: Making Life on a Tough New Planet*. New York: Times Books 2010, p. 2.



“demands an understanding of a story that is radically different from the usual meaning of storytelling with which we usually engage in the humanities”—seems to pertain all the more today; moreover, Parikka writes, “this story is likely to contain fewer words and more a-signifying semiotic matter.”<sup>18</sup> And yet the question arises: How could the geochronological unit of the Anthropocene, already spanning hundreds if not thousands of years, provide a perspective in which “literature” would still be legible or legitimate as an expression of the human condition?

According to an array of critical voices, it might not. Recently Tom Cohen has argued that the time of the Anthropocene is not “of literature,” but rather of cinematic time and an “inhuman, machinic, and interrupted temporality.”<sup>19</sup> Relatedly, Ursula Heise has suggested that a “database aesthetic” affords more possibilities to register and represent the current mass extinction of biodiversity than the traditional narratives of nature writing.<sup>20</sup> In an epoch where “the climatic in general and what issues from it” has become, to quote Cohen again, “radically counter-linear, a mutating hive of feedback loops of counter-referential force-lines, tensions, transferences,” literature appears as anachronism, a medium that is out of time, inapt to convey the spatial and temporal scales in which human activity now registers itself.<sup>21</sup>

Both the foregoing remarks and the contributions to this volume suggest that writers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were already contending with the similar challenge of imagining and accounting for an erratic and surprisingly volatile planet, whose history is suddenly and catastrophically implicated in human history. Moreover, instead of determining how or where literature has been outstripped by the weird temporalities of the cinema or the aesthetics of the database, it can be pointed out that the concept of literature—like the concept of nature or the concept of the earth—does not arrive completely intact in the twenty-first century, but rather mutagenized. At least three isotopes of literature exist: *loiterature* (Ross Chambers), *litraterre* (Jacques Lacan), and what Thomas Schestag, glossing a line by Walter Benjamin, refers to as *lithorature*.<sup>22</sup> In ways that remain to be worked out in more detail, these isotopes of literature point to a growing entanglement of the lithic and the literary, of litter and letter, in a time where litter is literally undergoing lithification. This entanglement is acutely framed by the Anthropocene and registered in the progressing withdrawal of an intact reference to the Earth, to a stabile ground, to a tenable concept of nature, to literature. In this volume are some attempts to think together the ongoing mutations of the Eearth with these mutations of literature.

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18 Jussi Parikka: *A Geology of Media*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2015, p. 20.

19 Tom Cohen: “Anecogographics: Climate Change and ‘Late’ Deconstruction.” In: *Impasses of the Post-Global*. Ed. Henry Sussman. Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press 2012, p. 32-57, here p. 42.

20 Ursula K. Heise: *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*. New York: Oxford University Press 2008, p. 67.

21 Cohen: “Anecogographics,” p. 44.

22 In *Loiterature* Ross Chambers refers to a genre of modern literature marked by a counter-disciplinary resistance to the prevailing structuring in space and time of work. Through primarily referring to flâneur realism, “loiterature” could be extended to encompass those dilatory narratives—whose protagonists are primarily peripatetics—that formally engage the deep time of the earth, from Peter Handke’s *Langsame Heimkehr* to Peter Kurzeck’s *Kein Frühling*. See Ross Chambers: *Loiterature*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1999; Jacques Lacan: “Litraterre.” In *Autres écrits*. Paris: Seuil 2001, p. 11-20; Thomas Schestag: “Interpolationen. Benjamins Philologie.” In: *philo.xenia*. Basel/Weil am Rhein: Urs Engeler 2009, p. 33-99, here p. 55.

## To Open the Issue

The somewhat fortuitous focus of the current volume on German-language literature provides the opportunity to work through a topic and a topos whose domain has frequently been restricted to the well-documented tradition of British literature.<sup>23</sup> Timothy Attanucci opens the volume with the question of legibility that hovers over each contribution: to what extent are conventional historical frameworks available for reading literature that engages with the immense magnitude of geological time? Instead of reading the narratives of wounded geologists in postwar novels solely as attempts to come to terms with the inhuman history of the earth, Attanucci also reads these novels of disorientation as critical engagements with the all-too-human political and social humiliations of twentieth-century Europe. Just as the lithic is no longer to be regarded as what is most foreign to the human, Attanucci contends that the meaning of geology cannot be determined without recourse to discursive and cultural operations, particularly reading and writing. The focus on postwar literature continues with Erika Schellenberger-Diederich, whose extensive commentary on the geo-poetics of Peter Kurzeck's novels acts as a postscript to her magisterial *Geopoetik: Studien zur Metaphorik des Gestein in der Lyrik von Hölderlin bis Celan*. Schellenberger-Diederich shows how the narrator of Kurzeck's *Kein Frühling (No Spring)* seeks refuge in the company of the very geological formations whose violent origins in the deep time of the planet are elsewhere a source of considerable anxiety. In Kurzeck's biography the basalt formations in Staufenberg serve the child refugee from Sudetenland as a refuge, yet this does not mean that they act as a static backdrop for purely human affairs. Like Attanucci, Schellenberger-Diederich shows how the catastrophic natural history of a region is entangled with its traumatic political history in nuanced ways that peripatetic narrators seem uniquely poised to trace out.

While the opening two contributions explore how an engagement with the deep time of the lithosphere can act as a cure for, rather than a cause of, narcissistic wounds, Sabine Frost explores how the cryosphere, and ice in particular, functions more ambivalently as a *pharmakon*: both remedy for and a menace to the vicissitudes of life, writing, and life-writing. Through a careful reading of Adalbert Stifter's *Die Mappe meines Urgroßvaters (My Great-Grandfather's Briefcase)* Frost demonstrates how the conventional metaphors of textual genesis and persistence—crystallization and glaciation—are disrupted by the novel geoscientific image of glaciers as fluid and fluctuating forms. Just as Adalbert Stifter's encounters with the glaciologist Friedrich Simony were formative for his writing, so too were Hölderlin's geo-poetics informed by his friendship with the Jacobin and geographer Johann Gottfried Ebel, author of the two-volume *Über den Bau der Erde im Alpengebirge (On the Structure of the Earth in the Alpine Mountains)* of 1808. In her commentary on *Der Ister* Rochelle Tobias elaborates Hölderlin's riparian poetics as a poeology of erosion. With reference to Hölderlin's image of an "aufwärtswachsende[n] Erde [*upwelling earth*]" from his contemporaneous translation of the Pindar fragment *Das Belebende*, Tobias shows how

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**23** See, for example, Noah Heringman: *Romantic Rocks, Aesthetic Geology*. Cornell: Cornell University Press 2004; Adelene Buckland: *Novel Science: Fiction and the Invention of Nineteenth-Century Geology*. Chicago: Chicago University Press 2013; Jeffrey Jerome Cohen: *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press 2015.

Hölderlin's river poem imagines the inorganic world as dynamic and animated—and how the poem partakes in this activity of animation. In this way the poem strikingly approximates the geological processes of erosion that were being elaborated at that moment in the emerging earth sciences.

The final contribution, a mineral biography by artist Ilana Halperin, also grows out of the fault line of geology and biography, a line that runs through texts ranging from Adalbert Stifter's *Mappe* to Peter Kurzeck's *Kein Frühling*. Halperin's artistic work—which encompasses illustration, film, sculpture, as well as prose—explores a "geologic intimacy" as it extends from a closeness of observation to a deep physical affinity, a recognition of being both embedded in and pervaded by geologic time. To revise Adelene Buckland's statement: for Halperin writing biography means doing geology. The catastrophes of both personal and collective histories, as Celan writes and Halperin reminds us, can lead us toward an encounter with contemporary as well as past catastrophes in the earth's history, an encounter that constitutes among the most vexing contemporary ethical dilemmas.