THE IMAGES OF THE FRAGMENTED LYRICAL SELF IN THE POETRY OF CHRISTINE LAVANT

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores the nature of the self-identity of the lyrical self and its struggle to define its religious faith in the poetry of Christine Lavant. The poetry represents an exclusively subjective expression of both faith and doubt in which the lyrical self rejects traditional definitions of God. The lyrical self of the poetry perceives a distance between itself and God and therefore perceives a profound lack of unity in itself. Based on the analysis of a few representative poems, this thesis will examine the significance of the fragmentation and the unique function of the imagery of the antagonist and of nature as projections of the lyrical self. Each poem illustrates an aspect of the lyrical self's struggle to understand itself in spite of its fragmentation and to define the nature of its faith in God. Lavant is as yet not well known, especially outside of Austria, and very little has been written about the dynamics of this struggle of the lyrical self to establish a relationship between itself and God.

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Part I

INTRODUCTION

The exclusive subject of Christine Lavant's poetry is the lyrical self, which struggles with its divergent feelings, inclinations and expectations as it tries to understand its role in the world and its relationship to God. Among the emotions most often expressed in her poetry are fear, hope, love, disappointment, anger, faith, and doubt. Isolation and loneliness permeate the poetic world, and the images through which this lyrical self expresses its turmoil are often overwhelmingly intense.

The most common themes are the feelings of isolation and fear in the lyrical self, the lyrical self's need for independence and self-determination, and its doubt about the nature of God. In the poetry the lyrical self continually defines and redefines itself and God in the attempt to diminish the distance that the lyrical self senses between itself and God. It is the intention of this thesis to demonstrate that in spite of the irresolvable struggles that are the content of the individual poems, and in spite of the repeated expressions of anger, doubt, fear and disappointment, the body of poetry as a whole is an expression of joy, for the poetry is motivated by the

freedom of the lyrical self to question God's nature. The poetry also results in a reaffirmation of that same freedom and a reiteration of faith in God's goodness.

The first part of this thesis will cover background information. Lavant is virtually unknown outside of the Austrian literary community, and as yet little has been written about her. I will begin by attempting to place her poetry into a historical context and by briefly discussing Lavant's life and personality. In a review of the secondary literature, I will trace the major directions taken and discuss the approaches espoused by the more compelling Lavant critics. Finally, because Lavant's poetry is exclusively subjective, the lyrical self is the dominant figure throughout the poetry. Therefore, it will be necessary to discuss that term and define it for the purpose of this thesis.

In the second part, I will explore the nature of the struggle of the lyrical self, which is to define itself and its faith in God. On the basis of in depth analyses of a few representative poems, I will first discuss the nature of the lyrical self and its world and establish that the lyrical self is fragmented. The fragmentation itself is indication of the irreconcilable conflicts that define the existence of the lyrical self. The antagonist, whom the lyrical self often violently confronts, is also representative of these struggles, because the antagonist is

essentially a result of the aforementioned fragmentation. Likewise, imagery from the realm of nature serves to accentuate the struggles of the lyrical self, and therefore plays a key role in the poetry.

Finally, I will specifically discuss the nature of the lyrical self's faith and its constantly changing relationship with God. The primary issue in the conflicts of the lyrical self is the struggle to understand what God expects of the lyrical self and what God promises. Because the lyrical self is conscious of a chasm between itself and God, it struggles to define for itself the nature of God, and it vacillates between faith and doubt in the mercy of God. However, it will be shown that faith in the existence of a benevolent, omnipotent God is the necessary premise of every attack against God. Also, by questioning the nature of God and repeatedly reformulating its faith, the lyrical self is acting on its basic freedom to choose or reject God. Finally, latent in all of the poetry is the knowledge that God is not absent from the lyrical self at all.

Part II

LAVANT AND THE LITERARY ENVIRONMENT

A. Lavant and German Poetry of the Twentieth Century

Lavant's poetry resists categorization into any particular literary tradition, though she does show at least some similarity to several traditions. There are aspects of her poetry that display characteristics that are generally representative of the modern Austrian literary environment, especially in contrast to the German literary environment. In particular, some of these aspects are a more passive stance toward current political or social issues and a very modern approach to the use of language. Aside from her ties to the Austrian national literature, she has also been categorized as a nature poet and as a Christian poet.

In a typically Austrian manner Lavant does not represent a break with the cultural past of Austria. Like many of her contemporaries, her poetry shows the influence of the Austrian Baroque, Impressionistic and Expressionistic traditions. Generally, at the same time as Germany was striving to establish a new identity independent of the identity propagated during the Nazi era, Austria was finding its identity in its cultural history. Directly after the war, Austrian literary and intellectual, as well as

political, figures began to programmatically reestablish the Austrian cultural environment at the same point at which it had been interrupted in 1938 (Amann 56-58). Whereas Germans were examining their role in the war, Austrians were trying to strengthen their ties to their pre-war culture.

As a result of this more conservative, historically grounded self-identity, the Austrians generally took a more distant, reserved stance of self-criticism very unlike the German propensity to ceaselessly scrutinize government and society. This conservative attitude is, for example, espoused by Ilse Aichinger in the essay "Aufruf zum Mißtrauen" (1945), in which she calls for skepticism toward ideological thinking and for critical honesty as much in a personal and interpersonal context as in the political (Daviau 8-9). Lavant internalizes this mistrust even further: the conflicts and criticism in her poetry are predominately personal. Therefore, in contrast to much of the post-war poetry in Germany, the issues of war and political responsibility are never raised in Lavant's poetry.

Just as the apolitical tendency in Lavant's poetry is reflective of the contemporary Austrian environment, her use of language is also representative of the literary scene of the twentieth century. A general trend, particularly in Austria, of growing mistrust in the adequacy of language to express reality can be traced back to Hofmannsthal's "Ein

Brief," in which Lord Chandos writes that reality and experience defy description through words. It is expressed in the concrete poetry of the 1950's, such as that of the "Wiener Gruppe" or Jandl, and in the epistemological studies of the 1960's, such as in Handke's Kasper in which the relationship between language and self-awareness is explored (Daviau 15-17). This mistrust in the adequacy of language can also be seen in Lavant's poetry insofar as the language in her poetry is not symbolic in a traditional sense; it does not describe a reality independent of the speaker and loses its traditional referential function to take on unique meaning relevant only to the world of the poetry. However, Lavant's is not a conscious experimentation and exploration of the boundaries of language as in the case of Jandl and Handke, but rather an unconscious striving by the poetess against the confining vocabulary that is inadequate for the expression of her emotions. Whereas Jandl and Handke use the forum of poetry to explore language —— whereas language is the subject and content of the poetry as well as the medium —— Lavant instinctively reforms language to convey an internal, personal struggle.

Furthermore, unlike the concrete poets, who tend to dismantle syntax and depend on the individual word as the most reliable mode of conveying meaning (Daviau 15), Lavant uses complex and exemplary grammatical constructions but sets individual words into metaphorical relationships that

draw attention to the linguistic system of word and object. Common words or phrases are used in new and disconcerting situations, such as in "Die Stadt ist oben auferbaut" (Spindel im Mond 94), where the central image is of the Närrin, who is knitting a wedding dress and burial gown from her *Unglücksssträhne*. One also often finds compound words composed of contrasting components —— words such as *Sonnennetz, Schlafbrot, Mondschwert,* or *Weidenwiege*. The imagery in the poetry of Lavant does not represent an external reality, but rather it refers only to the internal world of the poem. The conflicts that arise in the poetry are internal and specific only to the poetry.

Lavant has been labelled a nature poet, however nature is not the subject of her poetry, as is often the case in nature poetry. For many poets immediately after the war, for example Wilhelm Lehmann, nature poetry presented the possibility of reestablishing a self-identity by eliminating the human subject of the poem and grounding reality in the timelessness of nature. This avoidance of the human subject, according to Hermann Korte, represents an evasion of the issues of the war (17-44, 82-100). Furthermore, Korte traces this trend into the mid-1960's and states that even when used as a metaphor illustrating the war and the resulting loss of innocence and identity, natural imagery is limiting and quickly exhausted, leading the poet eventually to speechlessness (37). According to this definition,

nature poetry at worst neglects to address the situation of the individual and at best is inadequate to fully express it.

This is, however, not the case with Lavant's poetry. Nature is not the subject but rather the source of the images. Furthermore, the images in the poetry immediately cease to be images of nature and instead represent aspects of the struggle of the lyrical self to understand its role in its internal, lyrical world. Nature as a source of imagery proves to be as inexhaustible as the existential doubt of the lyrical self.

Finally, Lavant might best be described as a Christian poet. The struggle of the lyrical self to identify itself and understand its world is closely bound to its struggle to understand the nature of God and its relationship to God. In the poetry, the images take on theological proportions, and all suffering becomes analogous to the suffering of Christ, all abandonment a reflection of the original falling away from God, all hope ultimately the hope for eternal life through God's grace, and all disappointment a foreshadowing of the failure of God to keep his promise of grace.

In spite of the vicious and even blasphemous attacks that are led against God and religion in the poetry, faith remains intact as a necessary postulate. After intense questioning and denial, the lyrical self of the poetry returns repeatedly to devout expressions of faith, for the

faith of the lyrical self is not based on fear and blind obedience, on dogma and ritual, but rather on the belief that God is good and just and on its own inner freedom and willingness to subordinate itself in spite of its doubts.

B. The Poetess

Lavant (born Thonhauser, married Habernig) took her pen-name from the valley in which she lived for most of her life. She was born in 1915 in Groß-Edling near St. Stefan in Carinthia, Austria, and died in nearby Wolfsberg in 1973. Scrofula, pneumonia, tuberculosis, and an ear infection, all before the age of fifteen, left her weak, subject to chronic pain, almost deaf in one ear, with very poor vision, and physically unattractive. Poor health forced her to leave school at age fourteen, and at home she helped support her family and herself with knitting and later with her poetry. She never held a regular job and rarely travelled further than Klagenfurt. Because of the poverty of her family and her own inability to work, Lavant felt secluded from society, and her marriage to a previously divorced man further alienated her from others in her community.

She grew up in a strongly Catholic community prone to superstition, prejudice and apathy. At the same time that she clung to her faith, she was also disillusioned by the failure of the Church and of Christians to act according to what she believed God expected. Not differentiating between

physical and spiritual needs, she believed that personal wholeness is only possible through charity and sympathy between humans, as she writes in a letter to Ludwig von Ficker in July 1955:

> Nicht jeder bekommt das tägliche Brot unmittelbar von Gott. Ich glaube, daß es in den meisten Fällen innerhalb des Menschlichen von Stufe zu Stufe hinabgereicht wird. (Kunst wie meine 223)

For her, to show charity and concern to others was a profoundly religious act, because it reaffirms that humans are created in the image of God. She believed that the decay of religion and the growing influence of modern psychology allows for the objectification of human feelings and is to blame for the inhuman manner with which people treat each other. Armin Wigotschnig explains,

> Durch den Verlust der Gottesbeziehung der Seele des Menschen zerfällt auch ihre menschlich-göttliche Einheit und verliert damit ihre ursprüngliche Bedeutung. Sie wird durch moderne psychologische Interpretation versachlicht in eine Vielzahl "seelenkundlicher Begriffe", wie Gefühle, Triebe, Aggressionen, Depressionen, Schmerzen, Lust und Unlust, ja Instinkte (Bezug zum Tierischen) aufgelöst, und in der Erkenntnis, die Vielschichtigkeit des menschlichen Wesens nicht bestimmen zu können, zum Unbewußten, Undurchschaubaren umfunktioniert. (14)

For Lavant, the element of godliness within humans was the only element that separated humans from animals.

Lavant was not unaffected by modern concepts of psychology, and she vacillated between confidence in her religious beliefs and skepticism inspired by scientific empiricism. She needed God as an anchor that would prevent the world from dissolving into chaos and as an eventual

source of comfort and salvation from the perpetual suffering of her life, but cynicism toward the institution of religion undermined this faith (Wigotschnig 12). Lavant looked to God to provide stability and purpose in the absence of a nurturing society and religion. Yet the absence of a nurturing society and religion seemed also to reiterate the absence of God in her life. This ambiguity is reflected in the poetry, in which God is sometimes vengeful and cruel, sometimes apathetic, sometimes righteous and just, and only occasionally sympathetic. Most often the lyrical self of the poetry chides God for the distance that he has put between himself and the world.

Despite her aborted schooling, Lavant was very well read in literature, philosophy and both Eastern and Western religion, but Wigotschnig adds,

> Christliche mystische Literatur, aber vor allem die Bibel war das Geisteswerk, das sie beeindruckte; sie hielt sie für Dichtung wie jede andere. Das Alte Testament mit seiner Gottesvorstellung vom harten, rächenden und auch vergebenden Gott, die Lebenswahrheiten darin, die den Menschen in Höhen und Tiefen seines Wesens schildern, waren maßgeblich für ihr frühes Weltverständnis, während sie das Johannesevangelium des Neuen Testaments (nach persönlicher Aussage) als nahezu kitschig empfand. Ihr war die Vaterfigur des neutestamentlichen Gottes immer etwas suspekt. (13)

She preferred the strict Old Testament God, who dealt out punishments and rewards immediately, over the New Testament God, who only promises rewards and punishments. Furthermore, she distrusted that tone of familiarity between God and humanity that is conveyed in the New Testament

images of God as the Father or Christ as the Bridegroom.

Lavant did not consider herself, as a poetess, to be a legitimate, productive member of society, and there is a conspicuous absence of references to the act of writing literature in her poetry. In the instances that names, words, letters or writing appear in the poems, they are usually images for the act of creation or references to the Word of God. In the poetry, writing is a divine and mystical activity, while the activities of the lyrical self are usually more practical and concrete: walking, knitting, spinning, or gathering herbs. Lavant's feelings toward her poetry ranged from indifference to embarrassment, as she writes in a letter to Gerhard Deesen in March 1962,

> Überhaupt ist mir das Dichten so peinlich. Es ist schamlos [...] wäre ich gesund und hätte 6 Kinder, um für sie arbeiten zu können: das ist Leben! Kunst wie meine, ist nur verstümmeltes Leben, eine Sünde wider den Geist, unverzeihbar. (Kunst wie meine 234)

However, she considered her ill health, poverty and recurring depression her specific burden for life and thus considered herself, even as an outcast, a part of God's ordained order of the world. She continues in her letter to Deesen,

> Das Leben ist so heilig, vielleicht wissen Gesunde das nicht. Ich weiß es ganz. Deshalb werde ich mich vermutlich nie umbringen. Ich hab ja auch Zeiten, wo ich grundlos glücklich bin.

Though she was increasingly unhappy with her own life, she did not doubt that life was intrinsically good. On the contrary, the struggle that she describes in her letters was

to achieve a measure of holiness in her own life.

In her letters Lavant expresses the desire for a normal life of secure, unquestioning bliss that is the result of leading a simple, active and healthy life within society. Because she was not able to work and was plagued by debilitating fear, depression, sleeplessness and chronic physical pain, she felt herself cut off from a life in harmony with God, nature and society. She writes in a letter to Ludwig von Ficker in July 1955,

> Für Geschöpfe meiner Art ist es sehr weit bis zum Herzen Gottes. Deshalb mangelt es ihnen dann so sehr, so am allermeisten, an der wichtigsten Nahrung das Gemütes —— an Ehrfurcht und Vertrauen. Geraten sie in ein normales Leben, so wird dieser Mangel durch Liebe und menschliche Wärme verdeckt oder auch ersetzt, ist ihnen das aber vorenthalten, dann bricht wider alles Dämonische immer und immer wieder der tragischste und zugleich naivste Zustand durch, in welchem ein menschliches Gemüt sich überhaupt befinden kann, der Zustand, wo alle Kräfte darauf aus sind, die Entfernung zu Gott hin zu verringern und das um jeden Preis —— (und meist mit verfehltesten Mitteln). (Kunst wie meine 223)

She believed that the link between herself as a social outcast and God could be restored through human contact and charity, and yet at the end of her life, cynicism led her to be suspicious even of demonstrations of sympathy or friendship (Scrinzi 178).

All of Lavant's published poetry was produced within a span of about 15 years. Her first major volume, Die unvollendete Liebe (1949), was published at the age of 41. Though she was generally uninterested in the publication and reception of her works, she was particularly unhappy with

this first volume and spoke very critically of it in later years (Wigotschnig 22). The following three volumes of poetry, Die Bettlerschale (1956), Spindel im Mond (1959) and Der Pfauenschrei (1962), are considered to be her best. She was awarded the Trakl-Preis in 1954 and 1964, the Großer österreichischer Staatspreis für Literatur in 1970, and various other prizes. She also wrote several short stories and a handful of essays that have not been well received. She made few public appearances, associated rarely with other writers, and after the release of Der Pfauenschrei ceased writing altogether.

C. The Secondary Literature

Little has been written about Lavant, and she remains virtually unknown outside of Austria. A large portion of what has been written is intended to introduce Lavant to the general public and consequently focuses on a broad discussion of a variety of representative poems that briefly introduce the central themes of her poetry.

Several biographical sketches have been written about her. The most comprehensive is by her doctor and personal friend Otto Scrinzi. His article describes her personality and her writing habits but does not deal with the poetry in depth. Armin Wigotschnig, Lavant's nephew, has written a biographical sketch of the poetess in which he also discusses some of the common themes in her poetry.

Wigotschnig, however, preserves a clear distinction between the life of the person Lavant and the experiences of the lyrical self in the poetry. Though Wigotschnig is conspicuously more concerned with the situation of the poetess than in drawing conclusions about the poetry, he worked together with Johann Strutz to compile the important posthumous volume of poems, short stories and letters: Kunst wie meine ist nur verstümmeltes Leben. In addition to this, Strutz and Wolfgang Nehring have each written several articles tracing the development of Lavant's writing style and themes through her four major volumes.

There are admittedly many similarities between the poetess and the lyrical self of the poetry, and parallels are easily drawn. Aside from those already mentioned, some critics have discussed the lyrical self of the poem as essentially synonymous with the poetess, and they often draw indiscriminately from the life of Lavant to assist in the analysis of a poem, or conversely, the poetry is used to illuminate aspects of the life of the poetess. Often the term "lyrical self" is used interchangeably with Lavant, and the poetry is treated as if it were autobiography.

Two of the most prolific critics, Mirko Križman and Grete Lübbe-Grothues, focus on Lavant's unique use of language, and both have published either full or partial word indexes. Križman explores the dramatic metaphors that are symbolic of a split within the lyrical self. He

particularly points to binary contrasts as demonstrated in the poetry through the words, the images, and the favored form of the "dialogue" in which the lyrical self engages the "Du". Lübbe-Grothues concentrates on the individual words that appear in the body of Lavant's poetry, the grammar, the rhyme schemes, and the structural symmetries of individual poems. Both critics demonstrate that the internal, existential crisis in which the lyrical self finds itself is manifested in the words, grammar and form of the poetry.

Waltraud Mitgutsch draws on the theories of the French feminists and of Adorno, Lacan and Derrida to develop the argument that Lavant's poetry is an expression of her alienation, which is caused by her inability to fulfill the traditional role of a woman as mother and housewife. In particular, Mitgutsch's discussion focuses on the language of Lavant's poetry as a uniquely feminine language in opposition to the linguistic system of the patriarchal social and religious order. Mitgutsch defines the conflict in the poetry as the attempt of the lyrical self to deal with an "absence" that is neither the result of the loss of some prior unity nor reparable. This absence is rather actually the presence of an inherently feminine "other" that does not correspond to the expectations or language of patriarchal society and is therefore indefinable (95-104).

Religion and the relationship between the lyrical self and God is recognized as a central theme in Lavant's poetry

and is discussed to a greater or lesser degree by nearly all of the critics and commentators. Among those who have concerned themselves specifically with the form that this conflict takes are Weyma Lübbe and Wolfgang Wiesmüller. Lübbe discusses the distinctive piety that can be seen in Lavant's poetry. She points out that in some poems the lyrical self reaffirms its faith in God in aggressive and seemingly heretical outcries while in other poems it questions the very nature of God in what appear at first devout expressions of praise. Wiesmüller, on the other hand, examines the tripartite role of the Bible in the poetry as a source of imagery, as the vehicle by which the lyrical self criticizes the unjust religious hierarchy and self-righteous social order, and as the central symbol for both religion as a source of alienation and for God as the means of salvation.

D. Locating the Lyrical Self

In much of the secondary literature to Lavant, the term "lyrisches Ich" is used without having been clearly defined. Often it is implied or assumed that the emotions of the lyrical self are the same as Lavant's emotions or that there is a direct correspondence between events in Lavant's life and the images in the poetry. However, the very term "lyrisches Ich" indicates that a differentiation between the historical poet and the lyrical self in the poem is being

made.

The discussion of the lyrical self has rather recent origins, but its definition has already been developed in several different directions. The following three theorists are representative of the basic directions that have been taken in defining the lyrical self.

In 1910, Margarete Susman introduced the term "lyrisches Ich" in response to methodologies that set the self of the poetry equal to the historical self of the poet (Pestalozzi 343-47). The lyrical self, according to Susman, is created by the poet, but takes its form from the artwork. Consequently, as a part of the artwork, it takes on a life independent of the creating poet. Whereas the historical self is real, individual, subject to chance, mortal and empirical, the lyrical self is a reflection of the historical self that is poetic, universal, causal, and immortal. It becomes independent of the historical poet and becomes a mythos or a universal and eternal entirety. Though the lyrical self is created by the poet, in order that the poet may transcend mortal and worldly existence, this lyrical self immediately takes on an existence independent of the poet and continues to exist within its own artistic reality.

Eva Lüders also discusses the lyrical self as a phenomenon entirely within the poem, but defines it not as a poetic incarnation of the poet but rather as a vehicle

through which unity between content and form is established, a unity that is unique to lyric poetry as opposed to other literary forms. Her use of the term "Ich-Rede" demonstrates the emphasis that she places on the function of the lyrical self as a poetic device. She writes, for example,

> Wir sehen, daß das lyrische Ich sich nicht nach der Perspektive und Erlebnisweise des Dichters richtet, sondern nach der Beschaffenheit des "poetischen Einfalls" oder des Motivs, dem es eine maximale lyrische Wirkung ermöglichen soll. Die Ich-Rede ist also nicht einfach natürlich gegeben; sie ist ein Kunstmittel, das jeweils sachgerecht eingesetzt werden muß und das wir deshalb auch nur aus dem Funktionszusammenhang des Gedichts heraus begreifen können. (348)

As a poetic device, the lyrical self is not the perfected and flawless reflection of the historical poet as Susman believes, but a technique consciously employed by the poet. For Lüders, the lyrical self is a means rather than a poetic end, and she cites examples of male poets who compose lyric that employ "Ich-Rede" from a woman's point of view to demonstrate that the form of the lyrical self is not limited by the personal experience of the historical poet.

Regardless of the origin or function of the lyrical self, both Susman and Lüders locate the lyrical self entirely within the finished artwork. Thus they are justified in placing emphasis on the inappropriateness of consideration of the historical poet to lyrical analysis.

Gottfried Benn, on the other hand, does not locate the lyrical self in the finished artwork but rather within the poet, placing the emphasis on the poetic process. In

describing the lyrical self, Benn writes,

> Dieser Begriff ist die Inkarnation alles dessen, was an lyrischem Fluidum in dem Gedichte produzierenden Autor lebt, ihn trennt vom epischen und dramatischen Autor, ihn befähigt und zwingt, in spezifischer Weise Eindrücke, innere und äußere, zu sammeln und sie in Lyrik zu verwandeln, er umfaßt die besonderen Beziehungen des Lyrikers zu den Worten. (Essays 541)

The lyrical self exists, often dormant for long periods of time, within and as a part of the author, appearing at the creative moment to express itself in the poem. This lyrical self is not identical to the poet, even though like the poet it is historical and finite insofar as the death of the author means the termination of the poetic process and therefore the death of the lyrical self (Essays 544).

It is the task and only ambition of the lyrical self to set in words the existence of the poet and its own eternal, indestructible nature as the artistic process. It transforms the internal impressions of the poet into words, and these words are then the substance of a poetic reality independent of the poet. Consequently, the lyrical self is recognizable in the poem to the extent that the historical poet is not, and thus it is possible to discuss the appearance of the lyrical self in the poem while still locating the lyrical self outside of the poem.

Like Susman and Lüders, Benn does not assert that the lyrical self is unique to modern lyric poetry, but he only concerns himself with the modern lyrical self, which distinguishes itself from that of other periods or literary

genre. For the modern lyrical self, the words constitute the ends, as well as the means, of the creative process. Benn writes,

> Wenn der Romancier Lyrik macht braucht er Vorwände dafür, Stoffe, Themen, das Wort als solches genügt ihm nicht, er sucht Motive. Das Wort nimmt nicht die unmittelbare Bewegung seiner Existenz auf, er beschreibt *mit* dem Wort. Das Wort des Lyrikers vertritt keine Idee, vertritt keinen Gedanken und kein Ideal, es ist Existenz an sich, Ausdruck, Miene, Hauch. Es ist eine Art Realisierung aus animalischer Natur; auf ihrer Schattenseite steht ihre Seltenheit und ein selbst bei hohen Leistungen vielfach zu beobachtender Mangel an Umfassung. (Sämtliche Werke 356)

In Benn's conception, the lyrical self is the creative part of the historical lyrical poet who synthesizes the experiences of the poet into a poetic world that is above all verbal, and in contrast to other literary genre, this poetic world is an entirely subjective reflection of the author. The function of the lyrical self is to transform the emotions and experiences of the poet into a poetic world. Thus, while in Susman's and Lüders' conception, the lyrical self exists entirely in the artwork, for Benn it forms a bridge between the historical poet and the poem. Consequently, the poem gains relevance from the existential struggles of the poet, and the poet is able to anchor herself against general nihilism (Essays 500).

Benn's conception of the lyrical self helps to overcome a problem that other theories, which place the lyrical self entirely within the artwork, do not solve. The lyrical self is a concept that was intended to eliminate the historic

author from the discussion of the poem. However, if the lyrical self is a device or an incarnation of the poet within the artwork, it is not capable of expressing the images that are the substance of the poem, but it can only be part of them. Assuming that the poem is an expression of something, the author is necessary as the source of the expression and is necessarily a central figure in the understanding of a poem. Lyric poetry is not the expression of a fictive figure within the poem, for a poem can not write itself, nor can it be read as if it had written itself. By placing the lyrical self outside of the poetry and defining it instead as the poetic process, Benn makes it possible to discuss the expression in a poem of an independent creative entity. By also separating the lyrical self from the historical person of the poet, the lyrical self can be recognized as a personification of the creative drive of the poet and therefore transcendent of the historical person.

Lyric poetry is not simply the construction of a lyrical self, but it is a personal reflection of the lyrical self who originally existed outside of the poem. In this thesis, the lyrical self has two very closely related forms. In the first place, the lyrical self is an embodiment of the creative process. The lyrical self, as opposed to the historical person, is the creative entity, and it is the lyrical self that expresses its various emotions. Secondly,

because the poetry issues directly from the emotions of the lyrical self and because of the exclusively personal nature of the poetry, the lyrical self also exists within the poem as an image or a reflection of the original creative act. The lyrical self of Lavant's poetry expresses the existential distress of the poetess, makes Lavant's distress its own, and creates a poetic world in which it develops and works through its fears and hopes.

Part III

THE LYRICAL SELF IN THE POETRY

A. The Fragmentation of the Lyrical Self in Lavant's Poetry

The lyrical self of Lavant's poetry does not describe an external reality, but rather it creates a new, internal poetic reality that embodies the conflicts felt within itself. Because of these conflicts, the lyrical self is not unified, but rather it is often split into the various parts of both the body and spirit, each part representing different desires and fears. By splitting into several figures, the lyrical self expresses different emotions, ranging from anger, fear, despair and disappointment to joy, hope and humility. An example of the divided lyrical self can be seen in the following poem:

> Auf allen Stufen meines Leibes haust
> ein Schmerz für sich und möchte heilig werden,
> ich bin dem Kloster längst schon spinnefeind
> und wäre lieber ein Zigeunerlager.
>
> Der Abt ist irr, er trommelt immerfort,
> statt sich zu sammeln, öden Abendsegen
> und schläft nie ein, hält auch die andern wach,
> weil alle Stufen unentwegt erzittern.
>
> Sooft mein Widerstand lebendig wird,
> treibt ihn der Täuscher durch die Klostergründe,
> dort wo die Wirklichkeit ganz körnig ist
> und Brot hervorbringt für die Hungerleider.
>
> So bin ich Haus und Hof und Brotgerüst
> und manchmal auch ein ganz geheimer Hügel,
> wo meine Feindsal dunkle Trauben trägt,

damit die Heiligen Zigeuner werden. (Spindel im Mond 64)

The lyrical self struggles in this poem to establish its own identity by naming and evaluating the emotions and inclinations it recognizes within itself. The lyrical self perceives its body to be a cloister, but wishes instead to be a gypsy camp, and the images of the subsequent three stanzas record a transformation that would ideally ultimately result in the fulfillment of that wish. Corresponding to this struggle to understand its identity, the lyrical self struggles to establish a relationship with God, as expressed with the image of Pain, that wishes to be holy. However, it becomes clear that the lyrical self refuses to accept the traditional definition of holiness and searches for an alternative means of approaching God.

The lyrical self laments that its body is occupied by various figures. The first to appear is Pain, who, like a novice in a cloister, wishes to become holy. The reference to the cloister that immediately follows is, however, odious: the lyrical self hates it intensely and would rather be a gypsy camp. In the second stanza, the deranged Abbot who maliciously keeps his charges awake by drumming tedious blessings is an image of the heart. This image reinforces the already established negative image of the body as a cloister. Resistance appears in the third stanza as a positive figure. However, it is not described as productive, rather it is chased through the cloister grounds

by the Deceiver. Nevertheless, since the cloister grounds is one step away from the interior of the cloister and toward the gypsy camp, this is a positive development for the lyrical self. Furthermore, Reality is here producing bread for the Hungry, who can not hope to receive anything from the Abbot. In the final stanza, Hostility is introduced. This figure, like Resistance, promises to help transform the cloister into a gypsy camp. The figures demonstrate a marked intensification through the poem, culminating in this last figure. The image of Pain is repeated more intensely in the image of the Hungry, the Abbot has a double in the figure of the Deceiver, and Resistance intensifies to Hostility.

Throughout the poem images of wholesomeness are contrasted with images of malignancy. In the second stanza, the Abbot does not bring peace to his charges, but rather his incessant blessing causes the entire body to tremble restlessly. On the other hand, the Hungry receive bread from Reality outside of the cloister in the courtyard. As a Christian symbol for the body of Christ and consequently a means of communion with God, it is expected that bread would be administered by a representative of the spiritual realm, yet it is not. Likewise, in the final stanza, dark grapes, again a symbol for the blood of Christ and a means of approaching God, are carried by Hostility. The word *tragen* is a pivotal word in the poem, for if understood as a

parallel to the preceding stanza, *tragen* is a synonym of *bringen*, and thus the Enemy carries grapes that would be offered to alleviate hunger. However, it also means *to wear*, as clothing, and most significantly, *to produce out of oneself*, as a grapevine bears grapes. Hostility is offering a part of himself, just as Christ offered itself, so that the Holy may become Gypsies.

The means of salvation for the lyrical self in the poem is bread and wine, corresponding to the Christian symbolic ritual of achieving salvation. However, the concrete function of bread and wine as a source of nourishment and a basic, bodily necessity overshadows the abstract spiritual, symbolic function of the Sacrament. It is this concrete nourishment that the Hungry of the third stanza need, and not the life draining blessings offered by the Abbot. The images in the second and third stanza are of sleeplessness and hunger, basic physical needs. The Abbot of the second stanza offers only blessings to alleviate the needs of the body, but Reality and Hostility offer substantial nourishment.

While the images of holiness are insubstantial and unsatisfying, wholeness can be found away from the church. In German, as in English, the words for *holy, whole* and *healthy* are etymologically the same. In German, these words still contain the root *heil-*, and these multiple meanings create irony throughout the poem. The Abbot is holy but

harms the health of his charges, and Reality is by definition not holy but ministers to the health of the Hungry. Finally, framing the poem, the Pain wishes to be holy but is instead offered wholeness by Hostility. The lyrical self uses a traditional Christian symbol to reject the stagnated and meaningless rituals of the church and to seek a more sincere means of approaching God independent of the church.

Corresponding to this progression away from the malicious holiness of the church toward wholeness apart from the church is a physical dislocation. In the first stanza, the lyrical self calls its body a cloister and wishes that it were instead a gypsy camp. In the course of the poem there is in fact a progression from the enclosed space of the cloister church, where the Abbot offers disquieting blessings, to the freedom of an open camp. In the third stanza, the reader is no longer in the church, but in the courtyard, where the Hungry, who can expect no appeasement from within the church, are fed by Reality. The final stanza sums up this progression: "So bin ich Haus und Hof und Brotgerüst," and the lyrical self takes a final step away from the confinement of the cloister. The secret and mystical hill evokes the image of Calvary where Christ was crucified, and which lies outside of the gates of Jerusalem. Likewise, outside the city gates —— as well as outside the social order and established church —— is where one would

expect to find a gypsy camp. Thus, coinciding with the progression from the malicious images of the Abbot's disquieting blessings to the wholesome images of the bread and wine is a progression from within the confines of the church, through the courtyard, and beyond the walls of the cloister to freedom of the camp.

As the lyrical self struggles to approach God and become holy it simultaneously rejects traditional definitions of holiness. The rejection of the cloister by the lyrical self is not, however, a gesture against God. On the contrary, the lyrical self is searching for a means of approaching God independent of the stagnated, laborious rituals of religion. It struggles to find an expression of faith that is free from dogma associated with the church and that is individual to itself.

In this poem, the lyrical self recognizes and expresses its feelings of fragmentation and makes an attempt to approach God. It is not, however, successful, for though it can move from one stage to another, the various stages of cloister, courtyard and hill always remain part of the body. The ambiguities are not resolved and the parts of the lyrical self are never unified. The ironic coupling of wholesome and malicious imagery, as well as the juxtaposition of traditionally positive Christian symbols with negative images of hunger or sleeplessness, further epitomizes the lack of wholeness of the lyrical self.

Nehring writes,

> Der Widerspruch zwischen Frömmigkeit und Auflehnung, zwischen Demut und Zorn ist strukturmäßig tief im Ich verankert; denn das Ich der Gedichte Christine Lavants ist keine Einheit, sondern es besteht aus zahlreichen Seelenkräften. Die Auflösung der Person in Herz und Willen, Sinne und Hirn, Angst und Mut . . . ja, in einzelne Körperteile, die isoliert angesprochen werden, ist Ausdruck der inneren Verstörung. ("Lavant" 127)

The lyrical self is the center of a world that is populated solely by parts of its own body and spirit, each part personifying a different emotion. Thus a microcosm is created in which the lyrical self can express contradictory feelings of anger, doubt, and disappointment as well as hope and joy without having to, or even being able to, resolve them.

1. The Lyrical Antagonist. Because the emotions that the lyrical self expresses in this poetry are often aggressively angry, indignant, demanding or submissive, it usually addresses a second personification in an active confrontation. Almost without exception there is in the poetry an antagonist, who receives the brunt of its attack. However, this second figure takes various forms: sometimes the lyrical self speaks to its lover, to God, to Death, to a guardian angel, to parts of its own self, or to human society.

It is of interest to note that the antagonist is almost exclusively male, and it has been speculated that the antagonist represents an early lover of the poetess who left

her to become a priest.[1] More plausible is the more abstract explanation by Nehring,

> Vor allem aber werden angesprochen das Du des geliebten Menschen, den das Ich verloren hat, sowie der Gott, zu dem es hinaufhofft und mit dem es rechnet. ("Lavant" 125)

The antagonist is not a specific man. Rather it is a representative of humanity in which the lyrical self placed its trust and was betrayed, leaving the lyrical self abandoned, empty and indignant. In most of the poems, the antagonist ultimately becomes a metaphor for God.

The antagonist personifies a specific aspect or aspects of the lyrical self. It is then the recipient of the questions, accusations or supplications of the lyrical self, yet the confrontation remains internal, and the antagonist is defined by the lyrical self and is part of the lyrical self. In short, the unresolvable tension within the lyrical self itself is projected as a conflict between the lyrical self and the antagonist. In the following poem the antagonist is, at least at first, the lover.

> Morgen hängst du im Sonnennetz;
> sie geht für mich fischen,
> sie tut für mich alles
> und legt dich gebraten oder gekocht,
> wenn ich will, in mein Fenster.

---

[1]Otto Knörrich, for example, writes, "Die privaten Widerfahrungen am Grunde dieses Elends liegen . . . eingermaßen offen zutage: die nie verwundene Zurückweisung einer Liebe, die unendlich nach ihrer konkreten Erfüllung verlangte, der 'barocke' Widerspruch zwischen Menschen- und Gottesliebe, der aus der Tatsache resultiert, daß der Geliebte Priester wird, und der mit seinen leidvoll erfahrenen Glaubensimplikationen zum religiösen Kern ihrer Lyrik wird" (138).

Morgen kommst du dem Wind ins Garn;
er legt für mich Schlingen,
er tut für mich alles
und wirft dich ganz oder aufgebröselt
als Staub und Asche vor meine Tür.

Morgen wird dich der Regen erwischen;
er kann dich ertränken,
er tut für mich alles
und wäscht mich noch rein vor dem lieben Gott,
wenn ich will, daß ich dir immer gleiche.

Morgen lösch ich die Sonne aus,
morgen stoß ich den Wind in die Grube
und schütte den Regen ins Meer hinein,
denn ich will, daß du gern zu mir kommst. (Die Bettlerschale 98)

The violent intensity of the images is only the first indication that this is more than a simple love poem. In the first three stanzas, the lyrical self wants not just to possess its lover, it wants the lover to be offered up to it, for it is in the manner of a burnt offering that it has the sun and the wind lay the captured lover before the house of the lyrical self. The lyrical self decides instead, though, to use its power to overthrow nature and to allow the lover to offer himself at his own free will. As such, this is not a poem about the love between two people, but rather a poem about the essential nature of love, and even more, about the nature of the love between the lyrical self and God. By putting God into the role of the lover, the lyrical self is able to explore its relationship to God, and ultimately even to explore the very nature of God.

Throughout most of the poem, the lyrical self casts itself in the role of God and attributes to itself the

appropriate omnipotence. In this role, there is no question of why the lyrical self deserves the love it demands; there is only the question of how that love will be won. Almost imperceptibly, however, the lyrical self reverses roles and casts itself as the "Du" whose love is sought. The first sign of this role reversal is in the third stanza, in which the lyrical self admits its own lack of purity and expresses a wish to be equal to the antagonist. Here the lyrical self subordinates itself to God, and it takes over the role of the antagonist who hopes for mercy. With the hint of this new constellation, in which the lyrical self is not godlike but rather stands before God, the last line of the poem becomes ironically ambiguous. The lyrical self seems not so much to wish that the antagonist comes freely to it, but to say rather "ich will, daß du willst, daß ich gern zu dir komme." With this role reversal, the lyrical self reveals not the nature of its own love, but its desire and hope concerning the nature of God's love.

Yet the lyrical self explores more than just the nature of God's love, it also explores God's nature. In the first three stanzas the lyrical self plays the role of the Old Testament God of the Law, who clearly states his expectations and exactly prescribes sacrificial ritual. In the final stanza the lyrical self describes the merciful God of the New Testament, who asks only for people's uncompelled love. At this point the tone seems merciful and apparently

attests to the goodness of God. However, at the same time as the lyrical self explores the nature of God's love, it also expresses doubt in God's promise to demonstrate this love. Each of the four stanzas portrays the lyrical self promising to commit an act that would affect the devotion of the other. These unusually imaginative acts demonstrate this love to be conscious and active. However, each stanza also begins with the word *Morgen*. The lyrical self claims that it will ensnare the antagonist, but it modifies its claim by deferring action until a later date, just as in the New Testament, promises of the return of Christ and the Final Judgement are always coupled with the word *soon*. Although the time of action is imminent, it, like the Second Coming of Christ, may be perpetually imminent and never immediate. This perpetual deferment of action allows the lyrical self to entertain the hope that God will be merciful as promised, and it also delays the possible revelation that God is not merciful.

Expressed in the procrastination in this poem is hope, but also fear of disappointment and a deep-seated suspicion that God will never deliver the promised salvation. It is as much a declaration of love for another as it is an attempt to vindicate God. The lyrical self develops a model of God's promised mercy and emphasizes that this promise is possibly empty, that it has not yet been, and may never be, fulfilled.

The struggle of the lyrical self in the poetry as a whole is to understand its own identity and to determine the nature of God. Since the lyrical self clearly does not have access directly to God, its understanding of the nature of God must be worked out personally. In the poetry the lyrical self personifies its faith as an antagonist and then challenge that personification. In this process, the lyrical self explores and often rejects traditional defining attributes of God, such as his sincerity is this poem. However, while God is often defamed, the lyrical self's faith in God is affirmed.

By introducing a second figure —— the antagonist —— the lyrical self expresses these abstract emotions of faith, doubt, and fear using tangible images. The antagonist is not a figure independent of the lyrical self but rather is an extension or fragment of the lyrical self that serves to help the lyrical self define its role in its poetic world and its relationship to God.

2. Nature and the World of the Lyrical Self. The lyrical self, as the incarnation of the poetic process, creates the world of the lyric poem. Within this malleable environment the lyrical self is able to explore its emotions, play out its feelings and express in tangible terms its intuitions. Even in the few poems in which the lyrical self does not explicitly appear, it is still present. Such is the case in

the following poem:

> Erst beim dritten nachtschwarzen Windstoß
> ließ sie sich willig verwandeln
> in ein Ding ohne Oben und Unten
> im Seil ohne Anfang und Ende
> um die Mitte der Todesangst.
>
> Am Morgen verstellten zwei Sterne
> die einzige Stelle am Erdenrand,
> wo der Himmel leicht anfing.
>
> Überdies rollten viel Menschenaugen
> in Igelbälgen über den Weg,
> der zur Erde zurückführt.
>
> Wirklich, es blieb der Verzauberten nichts
> als das Seil und die Schneide des Mondes. (Der Pfauenschrei 8)

This poem describes the early dawn (die Dämmerung) when the earth and sky are still indistinguishable, but the stars are beginning to fade before the rising sun, and yet it is more than a nature poem. The images in the first three lines —— images of transformation, of a thing without top or bottom, and of a cord without beginning or end —— are images of eternity, and in the center of these images is the fear of death. Though the lyrical self is not explicitly present in this poem, awareness of one's own mortality is a uniquely human trait; in the middle of this universe stands humanity, represented in the lyrical self. In the third stanza human eyes roll away toward earth, an allusion to death and a variation of the Biblical prophecy in Genesis 3.19:

> In the sweat of your face
> you shall eat bread
> till you return to the ground,
> for out of it you were taken;
> you are dust,
> and to dust you shall return.

These stars, that are personified as human eyes and described as rolling towards their own death, are a terrifying image of the inevitability of death.

Furthermore, there is throughout the poem an air of reluctance. Although the dawn is willingly transformed into a thing without top or bottom, it is ironically only after the third push from the wind and only passively: it let itself be transformed. At morning two stars —— anticipating the image of human eyes in the next stanza —— block the way of the rising sun. The coming of the day represents the death of night and creates another image of human mortality.

While the lyrical self clearly identifies with the condemned stars, it also identifies with the immortal dawn. Death is not the only fear of the lyrical self, it also fears the abandonment that is expressed in the final stanza. The horizon is as reluctant to see the coming of the day as the stars, exactly because the dawn will survive and be alone.

The fragmentation of the lyrical self facilitates the expression of its often conflicting emotions. In this poem, two aspects of the lyrical self are developed as images of nature, so that in spite of the fact that the lyrical self does not appear in this poem, its fears are expressed. Nehring writes,

> Christine Lavants Gedichte sind reine Ich-Lyrik, auch in den wenigen Beispielen, in denen nicht "Ich" gesagt wird. Die scheinbar unpersönlichen Naturbilder atmen die gleiche Angst und die gleiche Schwermut, die sonst

dem Ich zugehört. ("Zur Wandlung" 20)

This poetic world is more than just a world occupied by the lyrical self, it is the world of the lyrical self. The fears, anger, hopes and disappointment of the lyrical self permeate the world so that every element becomes an image reflecting its emotions.

Just as the various parts of the body and spirit have separate wills and yet remain parts of the lyrical self, nature is in the poetry also a projection of the fragmented lyrical self. However, in other poems, the essence of nature as a part of the fragmented lyrical self is not as apparent. In the following poem, nature appears to lend the lyrical self security by offering it strength and dominion over its environment and its fate. As such, it seems that nature is primarily a backdrop for the poem rather than a central figure in the discussion:

Nie kommt das Schlafbrot bei mir an,
der Traumkelch geht an mir vorbei,
mit seinem kümmerlichsten Schrei
verkündet täglich mir der Hahn
den Anbruch trüber Stunden.
Hast du nicht mehr erfunden,
o Herr, um streng mit mir zu sein?
Dies alles macht dich weder klein
noch groß in meinen Augen.
Ich gehe Honig saugen
aus tauben Nesseln, wildem Klee,
ich schreibe Namen in den Schnee,
die alle dich nicht meinen.
Ich rede mit den Steinen,
wärme ihre Schattenseiten an
und lasse gerne Hund und Hahn
durch meinen Schatten gehen.
Auf meinen nackten Zehen
glänzt oft die Sonne gelb wie Stroh,
das Mondschwert macht nicht wund, nur froh

und biegt sich sanft zur Wiege.
Wenn ich so horchend liege,
daß ich schon fast gehorchsam bin,
dann überkommmt mich oft ein Sinn
und brennt auf meinem Scheitel.
Dann wird dein Strengsein eitel
und fällt herab als heißer Sand,
im Teller meiner linken Hand
laß ich ihn kühler werden.
Dann bist du sehr auf Erden,
gehst quer durch alles Mein und Dein,
gibst allem deinen Namen
und sammelst mein Gehorchsamsein
als Klee- und Nesselsamen. (Spindel im Mond 108-09)

The lament of the lyrical self in the first lines is that it is cut off from God as an insomniac is cut off from sleep, but in the course of the poem, the lyrical self approaches God through nature. In the two words, *Schlafbrot* and *Traumkelch*, are merged two images, one of basic bodily need for sleep and another of the spiritual need for access to God. Because these needs are not met, the lyrical self is isolated and defiant, so it turns to nature where it can suck honey from nettle and clover as a substitute for the religious ritual of Holy Communion. In nature, the lyrical self also writes names, a symbolic act of creation, for it is with words alone that God created the world in Genesis, and to spite God and assert its own independence, the lyrical self writes only names that exclude God. Nature provides the lyrical self with the opportunity to have influence over its fate, and within the realm of nature, the lyrical self is able to act out a role of a powerful force, essentially the role of God. Finally, by providing for the needs of the lyrical self, nature is able to mollify the

lyrical self and to subdue it into an obedient state. It is finally the *Mondschwert* that lulls the lyrical self and thus fulfills its need for sleep. Not religion, but rather nature provides for the needs of the lyrical self and allows it to open itself to God.

Despite all that the lyrical self does in nature — gathering honey, writing names and speaking with stones — it is far from omnipotent, and God has the potency that the lyrical self lacks. In nature the lyrical self imitates God but without God's effectiveness. Though the lyrical self imitates God by writing names, God has the power to give his own names to all objects, even those that the lyrical self had made its own. God then also gathers, not clover and nettle, but the obedience of the lyrical self as if it were clover and nettle. The only act that God can not perform is the act of creating devotion in the lyrical self.

God's inefficaciousness in this realm is especially apparent in the lines in which the lyrical self addresses God directly. At the beginning of the poem, the lyrical self is helpless and is forced to wait until the relief of sleep is brought to it. In this state of physical and spiritual impoverishment, the lyrical self chides God for not demanding more from it. It also recognizes, though, that God's expectations, regardless of the degree, have no influence in its life and can not force devotion from it. Therefore the lyrical self turns away from God to reign over

nature. After it becomes obedient, however, God's rigorous demands are still without influence. The lyrical self is already open to God and does not need God to force himself into its world. Though the lyrical self is essentially impotent, it is capable of accepting or not accepting God into its world. The lyrical self has free will and may choose to accept or not accept God.

Nature plays the role of mediator that is normally filled by religion. This can also be seen in the image of the dish of the left hand, an image that juxtaposes natural and religious imagery. The dish heralds back to the name and the directing motif of the earlier volume of poetry, Die Bettlerschale; the beggar's bowl is the focal point of reoccurring images of spiritual destitution, not only in that volume but throughout Lavant's works. In this poem, the left hand is similarly held out empty in a gesture of begging. The fact that the left hand is held out can be interpreted in many ways. The left side is often characterized as unclean and as the side away from God, i.e., Jesus sits on the right hand of God, and it is the right hand that one extends in greeting, with which one crosses himself, or with which one blesses another. However, in the vernacular the left side is the side that is closest to the heart, as is expressed in the saying, "Die linke Hand geht von Herzen." This paradox again shows the affinity between the lyrical self and nature, especially in

opposition to the church. Although the left hand might be unclean from the religious and social perspective, it is naturally more sincere and less capable of hypocrisy, and therefore the side that the lyrical self extends more naturally to God.

Just as the lyrical self projects the antagonist as a recipient of its attack, it also projects from itself the world in which this attack is possible. The lyrical self is able to manipulate the conditions under which it has its own needs fulfilled. In the same manner that the lyrical self is able to objectify its fear of death as stars and its fear of abandonment as the dawn, its willingness to open itself to God is a part of the fragmented lyrical self that is projected as an image of nature. The lyrical self of the poem does not exist in an independent reality, but rather it creates a poetic reality out of the poetess' experiences and emotions.

B. The Lyrical Self in its Relationship to God

The poetic world of Lavant's lyrical self is internal, created to allow the lyrical self to deal with its struggle to identify itself in a relationship with God. "Nie kommt das Schlafbrot bei mir an" begins with accusations against God, but ends in a mood of self-sacrificing devotion. Although it is not uncommon for the lyrical self to surrender fully to God in this manner, the lyrical self is

never blindly devoted to God. The relationship between the lyrical self and God is in a constant state of flux as the lyrical self incessantly reexamines its role in the world, God's expectations, and God's promises. The attitude of the lyrical self is aggressive; it makes demands, commands, insinuations, accusations, convictions and acquittals using potent, often shocking or even blasphemous imagery. Such is the case in the following poem:

> Zieh den Mondkork endlich aus der Nacht!
> Viel zu lange lebt der Geist im Glase
> und das Elend bildet eine Blase,
> wer hat uns in diesen Krug gebracht?
>
> Wem zum Heiltrunk sind wir angesetzt?
> Wilde Kräuter, keines ganz geheuer,
> soviel Gift verbraucht nur ein Bereuer ——
> Vater-unser, ich bin ganz entsetzt.
>
> Bist du der, der solche Gärung braucht,
> meinst du wirklich, dieser Trunk wird munden?
> Du —— ich fürchte —— deine Leidensstunden
> finden uns am Ende ausgeraucht.
>
> Zieh den Mondkork früher aus der Nacht!
> Vom Verlangen wird der Saft zu bitter.
> Ach! —— nur Sprünge hat jetzt das Gewitter
> in die Wölbung unsres Krugs gebracht.
>
> Gelbe Sprünge, die von oben sich
> rasch verschließen. —— Stieg in deine Nase
> eine Ahnung von der Pest im Glase?
> Gelt, du fürchtest —— wir vergiften dich! (Spindel im Mond 146)

The first half of the poem shows the lyrical self bewildered at the unhappiness in the world and it questions God about how the world came to be so full of pain. Each of the first three stanzas contains a question, each progressively more intensely critical. The first stanza sets up the image of

the world in a bottle that is corked by the moon, and it is phrased as a plea to God to finally uncork the bottle, for its contents are fermenting and turning sour. In a tone of bewilderment the lyrical self asks who it is that put the world into a bottle and started the suffering. The second stanza further develops the image of the bottle by describing the contents as sinister herbs that were intended to be a medicine. The lyrical self remarks that so much poison could only be used by a Penitent. The word *Bereuer* is then followed directly by *Vater-unser*, but the reference to *Our Father* is not intended to be an allusion to the confession of the Penitent. Rather it is the prelude to the confession of the lyrical self, and the lyrical self is obviously not the same Penitent as in the preceding line. Even though the Penitent and *Our Father* belong to separate grammatical clauses, their close proximity to each other, and the fact that the Penitent is not a reference to the confessing self, foreshadows a more direct accusation of God. *Vater-unser* might in this sense be read as a revelation of the name of the *Bereuer* of the preceeding line. Indeed a direct accusation comes in the first line of the third stanza. The lyrical self asks God bluntly whether it is he who needs the mixture, but the lyrical self also modifies its accusation by assuming that God is unaware that the mixture is turning sour, and the lyrical self warns God that this world in the bottle may be useless as a medicinal

remedy when he needs it in his hour of suffering. In the first three stanzas the lyrical self asks three times who has prepared the mixture, each time insinuating more directly that it might be God, but each time not fully implicating him. Three times the lyrical self warns that what was intended to be a healing potion is working dangerously, and yet the lyrical self has faith that the imprisonment is unintentional and that if God knew, he would pull the cork.

In the fourth stanza the tone changes. The lyrical self repeats its plea, but pleads not that the cork be pulled "at last", as in the first line, but rather that it be pulled "sooner". The time for God to act has already passed, and the lyrical self is accusing God of negligence. The lyrical self also states that the demands of God have made the mixture too bitter, thus placing the blame directly on God for the evil in the bottle. The images of the final six lines show an intensification in the fermentation, i.e., a storm which causes cracks in the glass. These cracks are closed immediately from above, and the lyrical self accuses God of both knowing and also being afraid of the contents of the bottle. Whereas in the first stanza God is the one who would hopefully rescue the world, and in the third stanza God is at fault for inadvertently causing the problem, in the final two stanzas God is no longer just neglectful, but maliciously mischievous and unable to control the

progression of his own prank.

While the question in the first stanza is rhetorical and has a bewildered tone, the questions of the second and third stanzas do not have this same rhetorical tone, but are more serious and probing. The lyrical self is no longer commenting on the predicament of its world, but is demanding to know who is responsible for it. In the final stanza, the tone of the question has again changed; this time the lyrical self is not pleading with God but taunting him. The same change in tone is also reflected in the change from the expression *ich fürchte* in the third stanza to *du fürchtest* in the final stanza. Through the poem, the lyrical self becomes more boldly critical of God.

Ultimately, the lyrical self calls into question all of the four traditional defining attributes of God: his omnipresence, omniscience, omnipotence and goodness. First of all, in that God is placed outside of the bottle, he is not omnipresent. Furthermore, in the first three stanzas the lyrical self reproaches God for not being aware of the pest in the bottle and accuses him of only becoming aware of it when cracks form. Thus the lyrical self insinuates that God is not omniscient. Because God is not able to stop the fermentation and save the world, he can not be omnipotent, and images of evil, poison, suffering and bitterness belie God's goodness.

However, a benevolent and all-powerful God is an

indispensable prerequisite to such a poem as this. Lübbe writes concerning this poem,

> Die Situation, aus der das Gedicht als Ganzes entsteht, ist nicht durch die Bitte um Sinn in existenzieller Not gekennzeichnet, sondern sie spottet der göttlichen Sinngebungsmöglichkeit. Immerhin: wenn, im Erleben der Dichterin, Gott nicht doch oben stünde, ließe sich keine auch noch so transitorisches Kraftgefühl daraus ziehen, ihn in dieser Weise herabzuholen. (94)

The existence of God, according to Lübbe, is the premise from which the lyrical self proceeds in its attack against God. The freedom of the lyrical self allows it to brutally attack God as a means of making sense of its own faith, but the faith in God's existence is not questioned. Further, the lyrical self's faith in God's benevolence and omnipotence is also indispensable, because it is this faith that is attacked.

At issue is the faith of the lyrical self. Each poem is a statement by the lyrical self of what it believes about God and a scrupulous examination of those beliefs. Consequently, the poetry is an exclusively personal expression of faith in which the lyrical self is not bound by the dogma of established religion or the confining expectation of society.

Because of the distance that the lyrical self perceives between itself and God, and because of the fragmentation of the lyrical self that is a result of that distance, the lyrical self is repeatedly prevented from placing its unwavering faith in God. In spite of this, however, the

lyrical self is never able to disavow God. The existence of God is the one, single belief that the lyrical self does not question. It is only the nature of God and God's relationship to the lyrical self that is the subject of reiterated questioning, challenges and probings. And ultimately, anger at God is always accompanied with hope that God will forgive.

In the following poem is again a reflection of the distance that has come between the lyrical self and God.

> Unter verdorrenden Apfelbäumen
> reden die Seelen der Bettler
> von Brot, das nie ausgeht,
> und von der verheißenen Wohnung
> im Hause des Vaters.
>
> Heilig singen die Unheilbaren
> die hohe lebendige Blume an,
> und taubstumme Kinder erlernen
> die Sprache von Wurzel und Steinen.
> Unfruchtbare berühren sich zart,
> sagen einander: Du, sei gegrüßt
> und glorreich sei dein verlassenes Herz
> in der Angst deiner Jahre.
>
> Unter verdorrenden Apfelbäumen
> schütten die Ausgesonderten alle
> ihr Heimweh bis zu den Quellen hinab
> und ernähren die Erde. (Die Bettlerschale 132)

The images are intensely diametric on several levels. On a spacial level, the reader's attention is repeatedly directed from physically high images to low ones. In the first two lines, attention is directed from the apple trees to the beggars sitting under them, in the second stanza from the high living flower to the roots and stones, and in the final stanza again from the trees to the wellsprings of the Earth.

In addition to contrasting images of high and low are the images of death and life, seen in the withering apple trees and the living flower.

Just as the images of nature are offset by their opposites, the activities of the outcasts are tempered by the ironic incongruities between what they need and what they have. The beggars, who already have food and shelter from the trees, speak of bread and shelter furnished by God. The unhealable, according to their name, can never be whole, yet their singing is described as holy, and the children are deaf and mute, but they learn to speak. Repeatedly there is a contrast between presence and absence, but it is the same things that are both present and absent.

Although the outcasts seem to have what they long for, what is absent throughout the poem is the absolute, eternal quality of God's grace. The outcasts provide for each other's needs that, since the Fall away from God, are no longer fulfilled by God. However, they are incapable of alleviating their own suffering, and are only reminded of their distance form God. In the last stanza, the outcasts have only the memory of God with which to nourish the withering trees, and they are unable to restore the trees' health. As in "Nie kommt das Schlafbrot bei mir an," the outcasts imitate the acts of creation but are essentially impotent. Just as the apple trees are decaying reflections of the Tree of Life in Paradise, the outcasts are flawed and

wasting reflections of the original humans before the Fall away from God.

The tone of this poem, however, is drastically different from that of "Zieh den Mondkork endlich aus der Nacht," in which the lyrical self does not remember a time when it was close to God and seems to have lost faith that a union will ever be possible. In "Unter verdorrenden Apfelbäumen" the outcasts remember Paradise, as indicated with the word *Heimweh* in the last stanza, and look forward to the reunion with God, as shown in the first stanza. In this poem, God also remembers the lost relationship and has not forgotten his promise of a reunion. Whereas in "Morgen hängst du im Sonnennetz" and "Zieh den Mondkork endlich aus der Nacht" God's apparent absence causes the lyrical self to doubt the sincerity of God's promise, the living flower attests to God's presence and good will. The contrast of the growing and productive flower to the withering apple trees suggests the same relationship as is seen between prophecy and fulfillment that is represented in the figures of Adam and Christ. In this poem the lyrical self identifies with the whole of humanity as fallen and dependent on God to restore wholeness.

The ambiguities that arise in this poem from the contrasting images of high and low, of absence and presence, and of loneliness and satisfaction are not resolved. While hope for a reunion with God is present and strong, it does

not take place, and the lyrical self is suspended in a state of anticipation in which hope is still paired with the possibility of disappointment. In each individual poem as well as the whole body of poetry, the lyrical self successively restates and redevelops the conflict between its divergent emotions. The lack of finality can be seen as an indication of the unresolvable tension within the lyrical self that is only held in balance by constantly shifting forces.

C. Images of Joy

The struggle of the lyrical self is to reconcile the various conflicting emotions, and it recognizes that the fragmentation is the result of the distance between God and itself —— the loss of wholeness that was the result of the Fall. However, the lyrical self is not without faith in God. Its repeated questioning of God both presupposes its faith in the existence of God and also reaffirms its hope for an eventual reunion with God.

Latent in all of the poetry is the knowledge that God is not completely absent from the lyrical self. Both Spindel im Mond and Der Pfauenschrei end with nearly identical poems in which the essential goodness of God and his closeness to the lyrical self is proclaimed:

> Früher war ich nie freudig genug.
> Erst beim Verscharren der goldenen Wurzel
> heute, während die Augen weinten,
> stieg eine stählerne Freude herab,

um mein Herz zu durchbohren.
Mutig schnitt sie die Stelle an,
wo der versunkene Anteil Gottes
silbern unter der Schwermut lag
wie ein Wald aus Oliven.

Und der Himmel gab eine Hälfte her
und die Erde hob eine Hälfte hoch
für das Obdach am Rand aller Sinne.

Jemand nahm meine Augen zu sich,
jemand belauscht mich mit meinem Gehör,
aber mein Herz —— voll von stählerner Freude ——
geht jetzt quer durch das deine. (Spindel im Mond 158)

The lyrical self does not claim that the earlier pain, doubt, and anger were mistaken; those emotions are all undeniable parts of the fragmented lyrical self. On the contrary, the lyrical self states now that joy is also present to an extent that it was not aware of earlier. In the midst of pain, the joy reveals itself, and it shows the lyrical self a place within its own heart where God, peace, and contentment is in fact present. The joy is described as steel, an image of coldness and inflexibility but also of durability and perseverance. This joy is as aggressive and relentless here as the anger in "Zieh den Mondkork endlich aus der Nacht" or the defiance in "Nie kommt das Schlafbrot bei mir an." The joy is not alien to the lyrical self, but rather as much a part of the lyrical self as its anger and defiance.

The revelation that God, who was thought to be absent, is in fact present and even a part of the lyrical self makes possible a recognition of joy. This does not unify the parts of the lyrical self, but it brings peace to the

lyrical self. A union with God would achieve a true reconciliation between the fragments of the lyrical self and would restore wholeness, but for the lack of that, the presence of a part of God within the lyrical self allows it to maintain the hope for the eventual reunion.

Whereas in much of the poetry the lyrical self's faith in the goodness of God can only be indirectly inferred to be a premise, in this poem this faith is stated explicitly. The joy, like the God represented in the seventh line, is an integral part of the lyrical self that it admits to be present, even when it is not obvious. The freedom that allows the lyrical self to lash out against God in other poems is also present in this poem and allows the lyrical self to accept its faith completely.

Part IV

CONCLUSION

Lavant's poetry does not cover a broad range of subjects. On the contrary, it has only one subject, the endeavor of the lyrical self to define itself and understand its emotions. Inextricably bound with this endeavor is the endeavor to define and understand God. Because the lyrical self perceives itself to be cut off from God, the struggle either to approach God or to dismiss him occupies the lyrical self repeatedly throughout the body of the poetry.

The fragmentation of the lyrical self is an indication of this conflict. In many poems, the fragmentation manifests itself as different parts of the body and spirit striving to exert their separate wills. In other poems the fragmentation of the lyrical self can be seen in the figure of the antagonist. The presence of the antagonist allows the lyrical self to formulate its emotions as an aggressive monologue. However, whether the poem is peopled by several personified parts of the lyrical self's body, or whether the poem is a confrontation between the lyrical self and the antagonist alone, the poems are the private expression of the lyrical self. This is even the case in the nature poems, in which the lyrical self is apparently absent.

Of all the emotions expressed in the poetry —— fear, anger, defiance, disappointment, devotion, love, etc. —— the conflict ultimately culminates in a conflict between faith in God's goodness and doubt. There is finality neither in the individual poems nor in the whole body of poetry. Each poem represents a provisional solution to the doubts of the lyrical self -- a temporarily achieved respite in the conflict between the parts of the lyrical self. The lyrical self, feeling that it has been abandoned by God, is repeatedly prevented from placing its unwavering faith in God.

In spite of the inconclusiveness of the struggle, the lyrical self's faith in the existence of God is an unshakable premise. The freedom of the lyrical self is expressed in its repeated attacks against the nature of God and against the dogma of religion. The strength of the lyrical self lies in the fact that it can retain its faith in God's goodness in spite of his apparent distance. The doubt ultimately strengthens the faith, because the faith is based on this inner freedom of the lyrical self to accept or reject God.

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