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**“INUNDATED BY THIS MISSISSIPPI OF POETRY”:
WALT WHITMAN AND GERMAN EXPRESSIONISM**

The topic of Whitman’s significance to German expressionist poets is part of Whitman’s overall reception in the German countries.¹ In more than one way, Whitman’s enthusiastic and far-reaching reception in German countries represents a curious meeting point between the two cultures, possibly providing a paradigm to help describe German-American cross-cultural contacts. Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine a writer who might provide us with a better opportunity to study the significance of American culture to the German-speaking world than the highly international-minded Whitman. The questions to be asked, therefore, are comparative ones: Which aspects of Whitman’s work were of particular interest to German-speaking Europe? How was his poetry read and understood? What influence did it exert? Finally, what does this all mean for a comparative cultural analysis?

Most Germanists would agree that German expressionism is the most productive and innovative period in modern German literature, although they usually have difficulties in formulating a workable definition of expressionism. What we do know, however, is that Whitman looms large among the figures that have shaped that period. Together with Nietzsche, the French symbolists, the Italian Futurists and the Russians, Whitman is frequently mentioned as a significant influence—but usually without an indication of how this influence was felt. Can an understanding of Whitman’s reception contribute toward an understanding of this highly complex and controversial period?

German expressionism may be viewed as the artistic consequence of a profound crisis in the life and thinking of turn-of-the-century Germans and Austrians. In many ways similar to the situation in the United States in Whitman’s middle years, Germans were baffled by unexpected waves of industrialization and urbanization occurring at incredible speed. Within a few decades, Berlin, one of the centers of German expressionism, grew to a

metropolitan center exceeding two million inhabitants. Such an experience was new to most Germans, who were used to the slow speed and transparency of rural life, and it had a significant psychological impact. The ensuing (primarily psychological) crisis of the individual who experienced great difficulties in attempting to locate an identity in this new context, laid the groundwork for expressionist literature.

Many studies of German expressionism identify two main currents within expressionist literature. One, which some claim is the more sophisticated and interesting of the two, tends more towards the abstract, the opaque. It thematizes the crisis, the "dissociation" of the self and reacts to a more and more incomprehensible reality with increasingly "private," abstract art. Writers often included in this group are Georg Trakl, Ernst Stadler, Gottfried Benn, and, to name a particularly important prose writer, Franz Kafka.

The other group, instead of retreating to the abstract, saw the solution in the call for a "new man." It emphasized the brotherhood of mankind and the establishment of a new world order (which, however, essentially reflected old, premodernist values). The visionary quality among these writers is significant, and their poetry is said to be "loud," emotional, and pseudometaphysical. Generally, this expressionism might be considered as the more optimistic counterpart of the other kind because of its underlying hope for a better world, a hope the more skeptical abstract expressionists would hardly have shared. Names frequently associated with this second group include Ludwig Rubiner, Ernst Toller, Johannes R. Becher, and Franz Werfel.

Both groups had come to know Whitman through the translation of Johannes Schlaf, a former naturalist and ardent Whitman admirer. In 1907, Schlaf published an edition of *Leaves of Grass* with the first German mass market book publisher Philipp Reclam.² Schlaf himself had gone through a significant change under Whitman's influence in the 1890s. In 1892, he described how his formerly scientifically inclined naturalistic (and fragmented) mind was overwhelmed by a vision of a new wholeness. Schlaf, who also wrote numerous articles on Whitman and translated Binns' early biography, came to see the American poet as a new messiah in whose spirit

modern science and religiosity could be synthesized, thereby "delivering" mankind. Schlaf, who was also in contact with the "Whitman Fellowship" around Horace Traubel, in this way initiated the Whitman cult in Germany and became its foremost prophet. His enthusiastic attitude also colored the character of his translation (which, incidentally, has often been declared insufficient but which must be read as a document of its time). In 1907, three years previous to the beginning of the expressionist decade, when many of the future poets were in their teens, Schlaf translated Whitman with a messianic fervor, emphasizing the already strong pathos of the American still further.

As might be expected, the radically skeptical expressionists were hardly interested in adopting Whitman into their own writing. Franz Kafka, for example, is probably the last writer whose prose one would associate with Whitman's poetry — both in the form as well as the attitude of his writing. However, the Prague circle of expressionists such as Kafka, Franz Werfel, Max Brod, and Johannes Urzidil seem to have known Whitman well. Gustav Janouch's account of Kafka's view of Whitman and *Leaves of Grass* suggests an interested and highly sympathetic reader:

Doctor Kafka gave me a little Reclam booklet, approx. 1 centimeter thick: *Leaves of Grass* by the American poet Walt Whitman. He then said to me: "The translation is not very good. At times, it is rather uneven. However, at least it gives an idea of this poet, who provided the most significant formal inspiration to modern poetry. . . . The formal quality of Walt Whitman has found an enormous resonance in the world. However, Whitman's significance must actually be seen elsewhere. He has brought together contemplation of nature and of civilization, which are obviously diametrically opposed to each other, in one single intoxicating impression of life because he was constantly aware of the short duration of all appearances. He said: 'Life is the little which is left before death.' Therefore he devoted his heart to each leaf of grass. It was this quality in him that enchanted me already at a very early age in my life. In him, I admired the harmony between art and life. When the War between the Northern

and the Southern States started in America, the war which more or less started the immense power of our machine world as we know it today, Walt Whitman became a nurse. He did, what every one of us should be doing today. He helped the weak, the sick and the defeated. He was a true Christian and therefore a measure of humanity, especially closely related to us Jews."

Janouch: "So you know his writings very well?"

"Maybe not so much his writings as his life. Because this is his main achievement. What he wrote, his poems and essays, are just glowing ashes left from the fire of a consistent life and an active belief."³

Obviously, Kafka projects his own ideal view of the poet into Whitman, thereby implicitly confirming the bleak view and desperate characteristic of his writings and his biography. Kafka was fascinated by Whitman's willingness to incorporate the "machine age" into his synthesizing imagination, his ability to reduce the complexity of modern society (from which he, Kafka, suffered) to the love for a leaf of grass. Finally, he admired the apparent ease with which the American moved through life as a person and a "true Christian."

It is hard to believe that Kafka, of all people, bought the fictitious biographical image of an ideal harmony between life and art in the person of Whitman and that he — more or less blindly — accepted Whitman's own claim "that his life and his work were necessarily one." Did Kafka not suspect what Paul Zweig calls the basic egotism implicit in Whitman's pose?⁴ Certainly, Kafka was too honest with himself to believe in the fantasy of such a life as a viable possibility and his positive vision remains confined to occasional observations such as the one on Whitman. Yet these observations do suggest the way the other group of expressionists, the messianic poets, were reading and comprehending Whitman's poetry.

Shortly before World War I, the most significant publisher of the expressionist period, Kurt Wolff, printed a prospectus introducing his new series of expressionist writing entitled *Der jüngste Tag*. Here

one could read a characteristic attack against the literary establishment and an attempted redefinition of the task of new writers:

Where men might forget the world over base causalities, he [the new poet] should stand up filled with freshness, joy, like a father, bronzed by the sun and restore the infinite. Thereby he will be the truly non-political, the absolutely non-partisan (but not indifferent) man. He will be neither an exclusive, nor a decorative democrat.⁵

The suspicion that Whitman's person, or rather persona, might have been the model for this ideal poet-messiah ("like a father," "bronzed by the sun," etc.) is confirmed by the next paragraph:

May they [the unenlightened scribblers] turn away from this enormous profession which they cannot cope with. May they suspect which steps lead to the truth! May they feel that this earth has born Isaiah and Tolstoy. That Whitman was crying when he took care of injured brothers in a military hospital at sundown. . . .⁶

The tone of such lines is hard to describe but entirely characteristic of messianic expressionism with its decidedly activist dimension. Obviously, Whitman (along with the old testament prophet and Whitman's Russian contemporary Tolstoy) was of interest to the writer of these lines because of his supposed ability to keep his life in line with the demands made by his poetry.

The pathos of the "deed" required to emerge from literature is most characteristic of expressionism as a whole and obviously coincided with Whitman's often-noted didactic, sometimes preachy quality. While the details hardly seem completely worked out and it remains somewhat of a puzzle how a poet might radiate freshness and bronzed good looks on the one hand and "sacrifice himself everywhere" on the other, it is Whitman's public image which is taken up by the expressionist movement. For the period between 1910 and 1920, the "wound dresser" becomes, for a variety of reasons, the most widely known image of the American poet. A group of three expressionists, Rene Schickele, Gustav Landauer, and Iwan Goll, translated

and published a volume of Whitman's poetry and letters from the Civil War.⁷ Some expressionists, among them the undeservedly forgotten Armin T. Wegner, actually opted, emulating their hero, for military service as medics in World War One.

The writer of the lines quoted above was Franz Werfel, an Austrian Jew of some literary reputation in the U.S. owing to prose works of questionable quality such as *The Song of Bernadette*, written late in his life. However, he deserves much more serious attention for his ringing in the expressionist period with a volume entitled *Der Weltfreund (The World's Friend)*, published in 1911.

Whitman scholars had long suspected that Werfel was to be included in the Whitman tradition, but Werfel scholars were reluctant to agree. However, Werfel's own testimony, both in private letters and in public statements, proves beyond any doubt that he was very well acquainted with Whitman and that, indeed, he and his famous wife Alma Mahler-Werfel used to read Whitman together. Early reviews of Werfel's poetry also show that he was *taken to be* in the Whitman tradition.

In 1941, following a narrow escape from the Nazis and his arrival in the U.S., Werfel had occasion to confirm his early championship of Whitman. In the antifascist journal *Decision*, he wrote:

I was seventeen or eighteen when Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* fell into my hands. I can never forget those intoxicated days when my mind was inundated by this Mississippi of poetry. Until that time I had believed that there was an aristocratic hierarchy of objects suitable for poetry. But Walt Whitman taught me and my generation that in the realm of reality there is nothing commonplace; that in the simplest word, the commonest designation, the most shopworn idea there lies hidden an explosive poetic force surpassing a thousand-fold that which is esthetically sanctified. Walt Whitman, this prophet of a cosmic democracy, taught us far more: that a mysterious, a divine stream of love fills the universe — a stream in whose embrace all creatures alike receive their religious value. And through his own mighty

example he showed us that the poet can be the antenna of the stream. The example of this Homeric American continues to work upon a future yet unknown.⁸

If the earlier statements by Kafka and Werfel reflected Whitman's influence as man and artist, this passage suggests the American's poetic significance. If the expressionist writers were looking for a liberation from poetic conventions that seemed no longer adequate to modern reality, Whitman's democratized poetry would be welcomed by them. Traditional walls of propriety were to be torn down by a democratic force likened to the Mississippi and the explosiveness of poetry could now be found in the "simplest word, the commonest designation, the most shopworn idea." At the same time, Whitman's love rhetoric is quoted and explained in pseudo-religious terms. Love, toward the animate *and* the inanimate world, becomes the creed of the expressionists and the poet becomes its technologized though somewhat dehumanized prophet: an antenna. This might remind Whitman readers of section 27 of *Song of Myself*: "Mine is no callous shell,/I have instant conductors all over me whether I pass or stop,/They seize every object and lead it harmlessly through me."

Werfel's poem "*An den Leser*" lends itself particularly well to an interpretative comparison with Whitman's poetry. It has been called *the* programmatic poem of the early expressionist period and was the final poem of the collection *Der Weltfreund* (1911). Somewhat in the tradition of Whitman's "Inscriptions," it addresses the reader.

To The Reader⁹

My only desire, o man, is to be related to you!
Whether you are black, an acrobat, or whether you are still
dormant in your mother's womb,
Whether your young girl's song reaches across the courtyard,
whether you steer your raft in the evening light,
Whether you are a soldier or a pilot full of endurance and
daring.

Did you, too, carry a pop gun on a green strap when you
were a child? (When it went off, a cork came out of the
barrel.)

My comrade, when I sing memories,
Don't be hardened but dissolve, with me, in tears!

I have experienced all lives. I know
The feeling of the lonely female harpist in a health spa band,
The feeling of a shy governess in a family that is not her own,
The feeling of debutants, shivering for the first time on a
stage.

I lived in the forest, had a job with the railway,
Sat over ledgers and served impatient customers.
A fireman, I stood in front of the boiler, my face
overwhelmed with bright flames,
And as coolly, I ate garbage and kitchen scraps.

So I belong to you and to all!
Please, do not resist me!
O, if it could once come to pass,
that we, brother, fell into each other's arms!

The similarities between this poem and many passages in Whitman, for example in *Song of Myself*, are quite obvious. Whitman's method of projecting the persona of his poetry into catalogues of individuals representing the whole world, the expansion of his "I" to global dimensions, comes to mind right away. Werfel's "I" likewise wants to extend its sympathies to all of man — and womankind, to blacks, acrobats and to those as yet unborn, to girls, raftsmen, soldiers and — announcing the twentieth century — airplane pilots. He then takes the reader back to his or her childhood, hoping to provoke him or her to "dissolve in tears." In this wet state of mind, it becomes easier to identify with others: "I have experienced all lives." Finally, in the fourth stanza, a complete union is seemingly achieved: The "I" *did* live in the forest, *was* a railway worker, *did* work as an accountant or as a waiter or waitress. And, by way of identifying with the even more unfortunate, he speaks of his experience as a fireman and, finally, a coolly.

Is it therefore a Whitmanesque poem? There can be no doubt that the *inspiration* comes from the American poet, and some

critics have identified this poem as being indebted to Whitman. As opposed to many poems in Werfel's *oeuvre*, the Austrian writer here employs the long verse, and, although Werfel does not relinquish the rhyme, this poem has more of a prose rhythm than many others. Thus, there is at least partially a formal equivalent which, in its attempt to reach out and encompass all of humanity, has obvious thematic significance.

But is it really a Whitmanesque poem? "My *only* desire, o man, is to be related to you?" There is a yearning in this line which is hardly characteristic of Whitman's poetry. Whitman's speaker is *certain* about his relatedness to others. In Whitman, there is no talk about a *desire* to *become* related; there *is* relationship, proven almost in scientific terms: "For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." In the catalogues, Whitman's persona is identical with his projections: "I resist anything better than my own diversity," he claims in summing up the universality of his being. Werfel, on the other hand, seems strangely removed from his objects. His connectedness with the world around him is formulated in the past tense and implies ominous isolation of the speaker in the present. While he claims to "belong to you and all," as affirmed in a Whitmanesque way in the last stanza, he also pleads, in a most noticeable German subjunctive (the "contrary-to-fact condition" as modern grammar would have it): "Please do not resist me. O, if it could once come to pass, that we, brother, fell into each others arms." From this vantage point, the catalogue of the third stanza is of course revealed to be a fantasy even from *within* the poem.

Whereas Whitman's persona is a "kosmos," Werfel's is just the "world's friend." Obviously, the American's ego is much better endowed than the Austrian's.

Whitman's identification of "I" and "all" is, as we have known for some time now, the result of a narcissistic relationship to the world. This primary narcissism, to use the Freudian terminology, enlarges the "I" to cosmic proportions and makes possible a new identification between external and internal world. The "I" deifies itself, and narcissism, oftentimes mistaken for and named "love," renders an otherwise alien and alienating world intact and whole. Yet,

in spite of all the difficulties this process implies, Whitman could still feel to be in tune with his society.

It was this quality which attracted the Expressionists most. Kafka marvelled at how a writer could find harmony between his individual life and an otherwise totally antagonistic American society and admired the ability to fuse sharply contradictory elements in his own work. Werfel, on the other hand, did attempt to follow Whitman, but with a characteristic difference: While he admired the "stream of love" flowing through the universe and wanted to be its antenna, his poetic practice shows that he never really achieved that union, that identity with nature and environment, in the way Whitman had. The European is more hesitant, more alienated by his society. Whether this is owing to German/Austrian socio-cultural tradition or the bourgeois' inborn sense of hierarchies, the Austrian/German poet seems to encounter significant obstacles to achieving a Whitmanesque state of mind — at least as evidenced in his poetry. The elitist posture and a sense of aloofness comes through even in a poet like Franz Werfel. There is the same impetus towards regression in Werfel as there is in Whitman, but the Austrian is never able to regress quite as far. After his first few volumes of poetry, the American-like struggle for a poetic democracy and "cosmic consciousness" starts to disappear again. Werfel rediscovered his special identity as a Jew and, later on, in Eliot-like fashion, even adopted Roman Catholic positions. This development can clearly be demonstrated in a later poem entitled "Näher mein Gott" (15):

Closer To My God¹⁰

How I sang the small paths of April!
The children's playgrounds and the riders in the park!
How I sang the black avenue lined with trees
and the forgotten well
in the oak forest!

How I sang the fear of a children's ball!
How I sang the happiness of the boundless opera!
How I sang Mrs. Farrar, the singer,
How did the boy's heart, the dark heart,
fly into her direction.

How I sang the toil of the old donkey in the evening!
The gray mossy death of the veteran in the grass!
The sweat of the fireman and the sweat of the hoary trickster
doing his tricks in forlorn squares in starry nights
was my tear.

How I sang this! And now I sing sleep,
the sweet stuff, not yet defiled by thought,
Rebellion, not of mountains, cypresses, lakes and images!
The sleep I sing now in all things! — He who sang the
cosmos, now sings the Nothing!

No, not sleep and death! Now I sing that which is beyond
sleep, the great covenant which often forces us to our knees
in the course of the night!
The bay of trust, our life to come, Fatherland, Canaan
Now I sing you, my father,
My father, I now sing you!

Again, the Whitmanesque tone is strong, but it seems much more like a reminiscence. When would Whitman have used the verb "to sing" in the past tense? Obviously, "love" to the world around the singer is no longer sufficient as *Ersatz*-religion, its empty metaphysics were understood, and a traditional relationship with an "actual" God is once again sought. Werfel's further career makes him turn increasingly towards *Gedankenlyrik* and, finally, to drama and prose. Rather than regress in Whitmanesque fashion and recreate the unity of the world on the level of the senses (foremost the sensualized sense of touch), he withdrew in a German (or even European) fashion, allowing him to stick to his elitist cultural tradition, deeply distrustful of the emergence of a modern, technological civilization.

There were a variety of ways in which Whitman suggested to European writers the possibility of a "new wholeness," a "new totality of being." Whitman's gospel concerning the "modern man" (the expressionists, characteristically, translated it as "new man") had a special appeal to a generation of writers in search of a way out of what they perceived as a fragmented and alienated existence. In theme, technique, as well as form, a variety of poets attempted to go

Whitman's way, and to the extent that they did, they testify to Whitman's vital influence in German literature. But none of these writers and cultural theorists were really able to overcome their European frame of mind. In their very effort to imitate or "join" the American, they demonstrate (oftentimes unwillingly) their discomfort with Whitman's radically egalitarian ethos.

This is true even of Johannes R. Becher, a fervent admirer of Whitman in his expressionist period and later a staunch Marxist and minister of culture in the German Democratic Republic. In his collection of poetry entitled *Die Schlacht (The Battle)*, the future communist produces a version of the imaginative "talking back" to Whitman which Folsom demonstrated to be so typical of the Whitman tradition.¹¹ In a "Postscript for Brother Whitman," he says:

See, my dear brother Whitman . . . just today I have again opened your immortal book (. . . o, what a book . . .) — and then I felt as though our eyes rested on each other and our hands were touching —: oh, immortal melting all-uniting eternal contact! It was as though a multitude of antennas, rays, darted out of our bodies, touching all beings, even the most distant objects.

Dear Brother Whitman —: hope, incitement, absolute certainty, out of the steaming mass of the swaying army of your lines I feel confirmed.

Yes, I almost would have said that I will take over your command for this century.¹²

Again the "almost" expresses a certain distance from Whitman. Because Becher ultimately does not agree with Whitman, as he informs us, in politics, economics and philosophy. An analysis of Becher's Whitmanesque poems shows that the American was an inspiration at best. From his protoMarxist position, Becher was not about to "touch all things" and transform the world into one large whole. Rather, his poetic world is one of fragmentation and separation. Although he calls for "fraternal melting" and wants to be "not lonely, but/wants to be/everybody,"¹³ his world is an exclusive one. The persons in his catalogues are asked to "unite" *against* their enemies, "the knaves of hell." Whitman's all-encompassing, even if naive,

view of humanity is transformed into a biased, class-based catalogue, limiting membership in humanity to the exploited and the suppressed and ultimately calling for a revolution "by workers, students, soldiers."¹⁴ In a different, that is leftist, way, German elitism has once again been superimposed on Walt Whitman.

Werfel's and Becher's readings of Whitman suggest the necessity of a careful comparative analysis of such texts. Obviously, the mere diagnosis of Whitman's influence on a given German text may be of little significance but an evaluation of deficits of understanding and misunderstandings of Whitman by a variety of German authors might reveal important insights into the nature of German-American intercultural phenomena.

Notes

¹Unless specifically limited in scope, this study uses the term "German" in its most inclusive sense, incorporating all German-speaking countries and cultures of East-Central Europe without, however, wanting to negate the significant cultural differences between individual German countries.

²Johannes Schlaf, *Grashalme von Walt Whitman*, Leipzig: Reclam, 1907.

³Gustav Janouch, *Gespräche mit Kafka. Aufzeichnungen und Erinnerungen*, (Frankfurt: M. Fischer, 1968), pp. 185/ff. The translation of the passage on Whitman is my own [W.G.].

⁴Paul Zweig, *Walt Whitman. The Making of the Poet*, (New York: Basic, 1984), pp. 19/ff.

⁵*Der Jüngste Tag. Neue Dichtungen*. Leaflet introducing the series, p. 3.

⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 3ff.

⁷Walt Whitman, *Der Wundarzt. Briefe, Aufzeichnungen und Gedichte aus dem amerikanischen Sezessionskrieg*, Zürich: Rascher, 1919.

⁸Franz Werfel, "Thanks," in *Decision* (New York), 1 (Jan. 1941), 43.

⁹The translation of Werfel's poem given here is my own [W.G.].

¹⁰The English translation is my own.

¹¹Ed Folsom, "Introduction," J. Perlman, E. Folsom, D. Campion, eds., *Walt Whitman. The Measure of His Song*, (Minneapolis: Holy Cow, 1981).

¹²Johannes R. Becher, *Das Neue Gedicht. Auswahl. (1912-1918)* (Leipzig: Insel, 1918), p. 135.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 70.