

ROBERT REITZEL, A.T.

(1849-1898)

by

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"Robert Reitzel, the editor of the *Armer Teufel*, stands preeminent among German-American authors."¹ For fourteen years his thought-provoking essays and his stirring lyrics fascinated the readers of his weekly, the most widely circulated German literary journal ever published in America. As a lecturer he exerted especially great influence in the *Freien Gemeinden* of this land. But his words on liberty and beauty were welcome wherever people gathered to hear them. An avid propagandist for freedom--religious, moral, social--but also a dedicated artist, Reitzel left the force of his personality on all that he wrote, said or did.

Born in the turbulent days of the revolution, on the 27th of January 1849, Reitzel grew up in Weitenau (badischer Schwarzwald) where he cultivated a lifelong hatred of monarchies and bureaucracies. The night he was born, the police searched the Reitzel home for a participant in the revolution, the brother of Reitzel's mother, to whom his father had tried to refuse shelter for fear of losing his position as a schoolmaster. His mother, however, persuaded Reitzel's father to give protection to her fugitive brother. The mother also gave

the child the name of Robert, in memory of Robert Blum, a hero of the people, who was executed in the revolution of 1849. The incompatibility of the parents caused much of the unhappiness of his early childhood. The father, an insignificant schoolmaster, believed in not sparing the rod; yet a great deal of sunshine was diffused during these early years by his mother, a woman of fine character who stirred the poetic imagination of the boy. Reitzel drew a striking picture of this poor consumptive woman who slaved in the wretched schoolhouse: "Es war ein recht hässliches altes Haus, aber ich habe doch darin die glücklichsten Stunden verlebt, und die dort sich mühte und sich grämte und den Tod sich holte--das war meine Mutter."²

In the Gymnasium this precocious, self-willed boy, to whom poetry meant more than his daily routine of dull lessons, proved to be a trial to his teachers, and was ultimately expelled. Nevertheless, he did reach the University of Heidelberg, registering for history and philosophy. As the son of a poor schoolmaster, theology was about the only area of study open to him, stipends being available only to students of divinity. Theology, however, was to preoccupy him very little, except for reading the Bible as an exercise in prosody and poetic imagery. He preferred to spend his time reading the works of the romanticists, such as Heine, Eichendorff, Brentano, etc. and began writing verse on the themes of love, wine, revolution, and freedom. He was one of six students who met regularly during those days, swearing not to rest until Ger-

many had become a republic. Twenty years later, two of these revolutionaries were dead, one had become a teacher, another a pillar of the orthodox church, and still another was prominent in governmental circles. The only one still dedicated to his revolutionary ideals was Reitzel.

It was customary for young men in that period, who had failed to establish themselves as professional men in Germany, and whose position in society forbade their doing manual labor, to go to America to survive or perish. Hence in 1870, when Reitzel's financial resources were exhausted, his father advised him to try his fortune in the United States. His account, *Abenteuer eines Grünen*, tells of the pleasures and hardships he met in America. Much has been said about the hardships of the lateinische Bauern in America, but even harder was the lot of the lateinische Vagabunden, or poet-tramps such as Reitzel and Martin Drescher. These university-trained men had to put up with hunger, the hardest and most menial sort of labor, persecution by the police, and actual imprisonment. After his arrival on the Eastern seaboard Reitzel tramped in Pennsylvania for a while and then began seeking winter employment. In Baltimore he went begging for work with an empty stomach until he seriously thought of ending his life. One day he crossed the path of a Reverend Pister who told the starving immigrant that the most logical thing for him to do was to pass an examination before the Board of the German Reformed Church and to take charge of a congregation.

In 1871 Reitzel was appointed minister of the German

Reformed Church in Washington. About a year later he married; this marriage proved to be unhappy and ended in a separation. As a clergyman, however, Reitzel could not have done his work more conscientiously. There were vague dreams of bringing together science and religion, of initiating a reformation of the church on a grand scale, of becoming even another Luther or Calvin in the nineteenth century. But he was to become a martyr to these personal aspirations. He met with so many discouraging failings in his congregation, of people who called themselves Christians, that he despaired entirely of the traditional modes of Christianity. Moreover his convictions were not orthodox enough for the Church Board who decided to give him the alternative of returning to more orthodox views or seeking another position. Reitzel chose the latter.

His unflagging enthusiasm for social issues, his love of truth and freedom, although these had precisely caused his clerical dismissal, won for him many friends in other German-American circles. For the next several years he traveled through most of the states of the Union as a lecturer on literary and social topics. Because of his spirited eloquence many came to regard Reitzel as the ablest German-American speaker, if not the German-American spokesman. To enable Reitzel to broaden his influence, his Michigan friends decided to found a newspaper for him in Detroit. The year in which this newspaper was founded was 1884, and Reitzel was to edit it until his death in 1898. As an editor and journalist Reitzel had inadvertently stumbled upon his real calling.

By naming the journal *Der arme Teufel* Reitzel had in mind history's disinherited geniuses, e.g. Feuerbach, Schiller, Lessing, and even Christ, but especially a chance acquaintance with a Norwegian itinerant inspired him to view the quintessence of his *armer Teufel* as follows:

Sein Weib starb im ersten Jahre des Glücks und mit ihr sein Interesse an allem, was sonst die Menschen ihr Teuerstes nennen. Er wurde zum ruhelosen Wanderer; aber, merkwürdig, wo immer die Standarten der Freiheit erhoben wurden, da hat ihn auch sein Schritt hingeführt. ...Seine wenigen Bedürfnisse deckt er entweder durch zeitweilige Arbeit als Schriftsetzer oder aber durch freiwillige Gaben, welche ihm gute Menschen darbieten. Dieser Mann hat seit langen Jahren nicht mehr in einem Bett geschlafen, "aber," erzählte er mir, "wenn ich so des Nachts an irgend einer Landstrasse liege, unter irgend einem Baum, und ich sehe die Sterne blinken und höre die Winde sausen, so kommt es mir vor, als ob ich der glücklichste Mensch sei, ich fühle mich als einen Teil dieser grossen unendlichen Welt, und von jenen Sorgen, wie sie die andern Menschen plagen, kann ich mir kaum mehr einen Begriff machen.

Das ist gewiss ein armer Teufel! und wenn wir bei der Taufe unsrer Zeitung an ihn dachten, so war es, weil er zwei Eigenschaften gewissermassen verkörpert, die einem echten armen Teufel nicht fehlen dürfen, nämlich erstlich die vollständige Unabhängigkeit von allen Verhältnissen, welche die Urteilskraft beeinflussen können, und zweitens die idealistische, tatkräftige Liebe zur Freiheit."³

About half of Reitzel's journal was filled with original contributions, most of them written by the editor himself. Some of his collaborators were: Bruno Wille, John Henry Mackay, Karl Henckell, Michael Georg Conrad, and Karl Heinzen. With the efforts of these collaborators, and also by means of his own critical evaluations of such authors as Goethe, Uhland, Heine, Seume, Boerne, Reuter, etc., Reitzel was to educate the German-American. But not only German authors, also Hawthorne,

Whitman, and especially Shakespeare, were celebrated by him in most original and trenchant essays.

Like Karl Heinzen, another German-American journalist, Reitzel felt the poet ought to be a man of the people, but not necessarily a socialist as Heinzen believed. He felt the nature and function of poetry to be social and not political. His ambition was to bring great literature closer to the hearts of every member in society, but he found this task increasingly difficult among German-Americans whom he considered to be falling away from their native tongue and its cultural ideals in an endeavor to become rich overnight.⁴

For a time, it can be said, Reitzel did become a socialist only because of his aversion to the smug bourgeoisie and their oppression of the laboring class. His indignation toward prevailing social ills often found in him anarchistic expression, but his independent temperament would not allow him ultimately to become a rapid follower of any social or religious cause: "Wie mir die Christen am Christentum, die Socialdemokraten am Socialismus, die Anarchisten am Anarchismus die Freude verleidet haben, so gehts mir jetzt auch mit den Individualisten."⁵ Any flagrant injustice, however, aroused in him an immediate response. At the time when popular opinion found it impossible to believe that the death sentence passed against the men involved in the Chicago Haymarket Affair would be carried out, Reitzel foresaw the revenge that capitalism would exact and tried to arouse the working class to action in order to save their leaders from the gallows.⁶ But in spite

of all he tried to do, four of the men were executed. His poem *Zum neuen Jahr 1888* recounts his disillusionment with the laboring class who were too terrified to do anything for the victims of the Haymarket incident: "Es war wie immer,/Es blieb beim Alten,/Wir haben uns Alle/Recht brav gehalten."⁷

Reitzel, the social battler that he often was, signed himself also as Reitzel the lover--both being for him the main expressions of his character as is revealed in a stanza of the poem *In Sturm und Drang*: "Wenn mich in dem Kampfgewühle/
Tötlich scharfe Hiebe trafen,/War mein letzter Frohgedanke:/
Bei der Liebe darfst du schlafen."⁸ His deepest love, however, was the social cause: the advancement of humanity towards greater enlightenment and liberty. The essay *Erste Liebe* touches upon this very theme: "Wohlauf ihr wackeren Paladine! da ist eine Dulcinea, für die es der Mühe wert ist, in den Kampf zu gehen: die Menschheit. Wenn ihr nur recht in die verliebt seid, dann findet sich leicht das sociale Heilmittel...."⁹ This twofold expression of Reitzel's personality contains much of Heinrich Heine's own *Weltanschauung*, and oddly enough Reitzel's own literary style in prose and poetry is even reminiscent of that past master of German letters. Max Baginski, the editor of the Reitzel collection, draws a notable parallel between the two poets: "Mag daran herumbosseln, dies und das mildern, das Charakteristische verschweigen, in milder Vergebung wegen der aussergewöhnlichen Persönlichkeit beide Augen zudrücken--für den engen Rahmen des hurrahpatriotischen Bardentums bleibt Reitzel eine zu glänzende, gigan-

tische Erscheinung, wie Heine in Reichsdeutschland zu unnahbar und zu gross bleiben wird für Gartenlauben-Schreiber, Regierungsrate, schwache Poeten und nationalliberale Stadtverordnete."¹⁰

The final years of Reitzel's life, as Heine's, were spent in bed with a lame back. It was hard for Reitzel, the active individual he was, to be tied down helplessly by his affliction. But while he increasingly became imprisoned by his body, his unyielding spirit struggled to be free. From his Luginsland or Matrazengruft, as Reitzel referred to his couch that was set before a window, he was to prepare many an essay and poem for the outside world.

Six months before his death Reitzel became acquainted with the poet Martin Drescher, and their friendship was to be important for Reitzel's journal. His intimate conversations with Drescher made Reitzel select his friend as his successor in the work of *Der arme Teufel*. For two years Drescher did so very ably, but financial difficulties finally put an end to the publication.

Reitzel's general disposition during his remaining years was cheerful. Whenever friends visited his sickroom it became the scene of a joyous occasion with wine and song. An autopsy was to reveal that all of the poet's organs were diseased--lungs, kidneys, liver--all but his heart. According to a statement by the poet's physician, Reitzel died of tuberculosis, a condition he had inherited from his mother. The disease attacked the spine, causing paralysis in his lower

limbs. Karl Schmidt, a Detroit businessman, offered Reitzel his summer home, Villa Weidenlaub, on Lake Orion in Canada when his condition began to worsen. This lovely spot became the poet's retreat for his final years. Death came on April 1, 1898 after Reitzel's forty-ninth birthday, but not at the villa as he had hoped. At his request his friends had his body cremated and then met together at Lake Orion to celebrate his memory over wine cups. He had envisioned such a gathering in a dream account: Die Tote am Orionsee.¹¹

Concerning his own life and its achievements Reitzel was from time to time pessimistic. All of his idealism and his aspirations for a liberated mankind seemed to have exerted very little influence over his contemporaries. In the resigned strains of the poem *Zuletzt* he voiced this disillusionment: "Die sanfte Schwermut...flüstert dir ins Herz das kühle Wort,/ Das aller Weisheit letzter Trost,/Dass man die Sterne nicht begehrt,/Und dass man arm dahinfährt, wie man kam."¹²

On December 6, 1884 Reitzel announced the program of a new journal, *Der arme Teufel*, in a short lyric poem entitled *Für Freund und Feind*:

Mir bleibe fern der Unkenchor der Heuchler,
 Mir bleibe fern, wer lächelt stets und witzelt,
 Mir bleibe fern, wen nur Gemeines kitzelt,
 Mir bleiben fern die Händler und die Schmeichler!

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Ich lob mir leichte, lustige Gesellen,
 Die gerne sind, wo volle Becher winken,
 Und gern der Schönheit an den Busen sinken,
 Doch die auch, wenn zu Kampf die Hörner gellen

Begreifen unsrer Zeit gewalt'ges Ringen,
 Im Herzen heil'gen Zornes Springquell tragen,
 Der Freiheit ihre Schlachten helfen schlagen,¹³
 Und köstlich Herzblut ihr zum Opfer bringen.

In German-American letters Reitzel remains an anomaly. His life was an integral part of a movement in the 80's known as Jüngstdeutschland, a socialistically tainted naturalism: two tendencies which were not necessarily related, but which competed for the imagination of German writers during the 80's and early 90's. No serious writer of this period was left untouched by these trends. Jüngstdeutschland was an inevitable reaction to what had gone before in art, as well as a social protest against the economic conditions of the times. Both the social and the literary movements developed differently with each author, many of whom survived the age to go on to literary fame. The writers most closely related to Reitzel and with whom he must be grouped were Karl Henckell, John Henry Mackay, Bruno Wille, and Reinhold Maurice von Stern. All were contributors to Reitzel's Armer Teufel.

For a subscription of \$2.50 per year (five cents a copy) to Reitzel's journal the German-American could read a journal similar in its social outlook to Die Gesellschaft which was founded two months after Reitzel's publication. Reitzel frequently quoted from this sister journal in Munich for which he wrote several essays. Upon his death the Gesellschaft lauded Reitzel's work in an article which appeared in its twelfth issue.

Indeed, Der arme Teufel was much more provincial than Die Gesellschaft to which all of the great literary figures of the

day contributed. The social and literary spectrum of *Der arme Teufel* was, therefore, not nearly as wide, and its main interest was more revolutionary than aesthetic: the fight against the church and the ideals of the *Aufklärer* were emphasized much more in Detroit than in Munich. Nonetheless, it is this distinctness that makes Reitzel's publication something uniquely German-American and ought to be valued especially for this reason. Both journals do have, however, the same iconoclastic enthusiasm for social change, and their format at least was similar: short stories, poems, plays, reviews, political, literary, and religious essays, correspondence with readers, and theatrical and musical notices.

It cannot be said of Reitzel that he had a truly great influence over German-Americans. During his lifetime he was never able to enlist a large body of followers from among the German-American community. His influence failed for two reasons, namely: his attacks on religion made impossible any contact with *Kirchendeutsche* who were far more orthodox than their cousins in Germany, while his ridicule of philistinism lost for him the sympathy of many free-thinkers who would have readily forgiven the poet's lack of piety. Thus his followers were a select and small circle of authors, socialists, anarchists, and Bohemians--anything but the *Prominenten* of acceptable society. After his death various *Armer Teufel* clubs were formed in Toledo, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, St. Louis, and other places. Just how extensively Reitzel influenced German-American culture, is difficult to estimate, "but wher-

ever Reitzel carried the message of the world's best literature, he brought the very finest, and his influence might be said to have been deep rather than broad."¹⁴

Another importance of *Der arme Teufel* is that it leads German-American publications in the number of contemporary German poets it introduced to the public. Though the paper was by nature radical, its literary standard was far from being narrow. It was fortunate for the journal that Reitzel's literary taste was truly cosmopolitan and that he possessed a fine appreciation of the classics, combined with a keen eye for newer works of lasting value. The greatest service to the journal was his gift for literary criticism.

Reitzel addressed himself to Germans in their language and dealt, therefore, mostly with German literature. But his knowledge of literature was by no means confined to the writings of one nation; he was aware, for example, of the greatness of Walt Whitman. To both Reitzel and German critics of the *Gesellschaft* Whitman was America's greatest poet, whom Reitzel heralded as a mediator in international peace and a prophet of a freer humanity. He also reviewed and reprinted in the *Armer Teufel* a vast number of contemporary works. Poems by one hundred and eighty-one modern German writers appeared in his publication, about a tenth of them written for the *Armer Teufel*, many translated from English and French, and about sixty poems were penned by the editor himself. Of the thirty leading contributors eleven were German-Americans, a fact which shows that the journal was truly a cultural phenomenon of

German-American art. "Never before nor since has there been such a representative German-American belletristic and aesthetic journal."¹⁵

Yet it was Reitzel's own critical talent that did much more for the spread of interest in the best of German and foreign literatures than merely his printing of poems and stories. Week after week he reviewed some German author or a particular work and discussed both in sensitive, vivid, and generous fashion. He took a great deal of pride in this work and it must be said "that it is a unique cultural act in America."¹⁶ He had an unpretentious drive to bring great literature to the public which was his abiding belief as a man of letters: "...ich meine, es gebe keine schönere Aufgabe als das ewig Schöne und das ewig Wahre, das was die Dichter in ihren Liedern verkörpert, so viel als möglich in unserm alltäglichen Leben heimisch, so viel als möglich dem arbeitenden Manne, der arbeitenden Frau zu eigen zu machen."¹⁷

The importance of Reitzel's labors can, in conclusion, best be evaluated by those who were closest to his journalistic efforts. Amalie von Ende in an essay appearing (May, 1899) in the Literarisches Echo had this to say: "Reitzel founded his Armer Teufel, this precious enfant terrible of German-American journalism, an organ which swore allegiance to no 'ism' whatsoever, but which for a period of fourteen years tossed week for week its flaming torch into the camp of philistinism.... It is an achievement which is not sufficiently recognized that it was Reitzel who introduced the German-

American public to Liliencron, Wille, Mackay, Henckell, Bierbaum, Wedekind, Keller and many others...."¹⁸ Max Baginski, the editor of Reitzel's collected writings offered the following comment: "Reitzel hatte sicher sehr schätzbare Qualitäten, mit welchen auch das Deutschtum schlechthin sich glänzend drapieren könnte. Seine Genialität, seine ausserordentliche Begabung, vor allem sein Stil stehen unübertroffen da unter den deutsch-amerikanischen Schriftstellern."¹⁹ In a study of German-American poets to be found in Singer's Jahrbuch für 1917 Martin Drescher writes: "Unbestritten war Robert Reitzel unter deutsch-amerikanischen Schriftstellern der letzten Jahrzehnte der grösste Stilist; er war auch einer der gedankenreichsten. Souverän wie der grosse Virtuose sein Instrument herrscht, beherrscht er die deutsche Sprache. Für jede Empfindung, die auf ein Menschenherz eindringen kann, fand er mit bewunderswerter Feinheit das treffende Wort.... Er war vornehmlich ein Dichter in Prosa, dessen Skizzen und Schilderungen, dessen Erinnerungen und Bekenntnisse nicht so bald vergehen. Aber auch von seinen Versen können manche sich getrost den besten Erzeugnissen der deutsch-amerikanischen Literatur an die Seite stellen."²⁰ A final incentive to further research Reitzel's singular literary productivity was made by Rudolf Rieder: "Robert Reitzel als Dichter der besten deutschen Prosa in Amerika und der anerkannte Literaturvermittler seiner Gemeinde von Anhängern verdient mehr Beachtung, als ihm bis jetzt zugekommen ist; das freisinnige Element der deutschen Einwanderung zu kennen ist Pflicht des amerikanischen Historikers."²¹

FOOTNOTES

¹ Adolf Eduard Zucker, Robert Reitzel (Philadelphia; Americana-Germanica Press, No. 25, 1917), p. 9. Cf. also Johannes Gaulke, "Robert Reitzel," Das literarische Echo, IV (1901-02); Edna Fern, "Robert Reitzel, ein deutsch-amerikanischer Heine," Deutscher Vorkämpfer, II, 5 (1908), 25-26; P. E. Werkshagen, Robert Reitzel. Seine Persönlichkeit und seine Weltanschauung (Champaign, Ill., 1908).

² Robert Reitzel, Des armen Teufels gesammelte Schriften, ed. Max Baginski (Detroit, 1913), I, 25.

³ Op. cit., III, 10-11.

⁴ Robert Reitzel, Mein Buch (Detroit, 1900), p. 166ff.

⁵ Op. cit., pp. 299-300.

⁶ Reitzel, Gesammelte Schriften, III, 112.

⁷ Reitzel, Mein Buch, p. 419.

⁸ Reitzel, Gesammelte Schriften, II, 31.

⁹ Reitzel, Mein Buch, p. 33.

¹⁰ Reitzel, Gesammelte Schriften, I, 10.

¹¹ Op. cit., III, 199.

¹² Op. cit., II, 49.

¹³ Ibid., 10.

¹⁴ Zucker, op. cit., p. 58.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 73

¹⁶ Loc. cit.

¹⁷ Reitzel, Mein Buch, p. 116.

¹⁸ Zucker, op. cit., p. 55.

¹⁹ Reitzel, Gesammelte Schriften, I, 10.

²⁰ Zucker, op. cit., p. 56.

²¹ Rudolf Theodor Rieder, Ein Bild Robert Reitzels und des armen Teufels aus seinem Verhältnis zur Litteratur (Diss.: University of Wisconsin, 1918), p. ii.