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Jacob Stoll and Heinrich Danner, Early German-American Authors of Unusual Religious Poems

Except for Francis Daniel Pastorius and Conrad Beissel, early German-American poetry has not fared well in recent research. Part of the reason must be the fact that, with the exception of Pastorius, almost all the writings of early German-American authors were of a religious nature. The great number of hymns—Beissel alone wrote countless hymns, two of them with over 200 stanzas each—makes it difficult to select those of special interest. In the Protestant Church the preference of certain hymns over others has resulted in a process of natural selection. Few hymnals printed in this country contained works by German-Americans and these disappeared quickly in the course of time. Their religious poetry lived on, at best, in specialized collections. And yet, there are some poems of note, two of which I will take up below.

The best survey and selection of early German-American poetry is found in John Joseph Stoudt's *Pennsylvania German Poetry, 1685–1830*.¹ Stoudt, in addition to a lengthy introduction, prints specimens from a great variety of sources, both from books and manuscripts, and by authors of many different denominations. I hope to be able to show that the two poems I selected for analysis are of special interest and should be better known. One poem is by Jacob Stoll, the other by Heinrich Danner. Both were members of the Brethren Church, a church that evolved from pietism in Germany. Here Alexander Mack established the first congregation in 1708. Being persecuted, members of the church came to Germantown, Pennsylvania, and then spread westward. They practice baptism by immersion, are pacifists, and aim to lead a simple life.²

As my comments will make clear, Stoll and Danner were familiar, of course in addition to the Bible, with the German mystical and pietistic traditions. We know that works by authors like Johannes Scheffler (Angelus Silesius, 1624–77) and Joachim Neander (1650–80) were read widely by

early German Americans. I refer, then, to these two, but not in the sense that they should be considered the exact source for the German-American author but rather that they provide parallels.

Jacob Stoll, whose dates are from 1731 to 1822, was a weaver and was known for his severely simple life style. In 1753 he was elected to the ministry of the Conestoga congregation, located just south of Lancaster, Pennsylvania. His book of poems and meditations on Biblical passages appeared in 1806 with the title *Geistliches Gewürz=Gärtlein Heilsuchender Seelen*.³

Most of Stoll's religious poetry has the expected contents: hope that Christ will draw the speaker to him, to salvation, and away from worldly pleasures and that the speaker will find peace in this world and eternal life in the other. However the following poem goes beyond the typical:

Das stille Nichts

- O! stilles Nichts, wo man verlassen
Vnd ganz vergessen alles gar;
Wo man das Eins, im nichts thut fassen,
Wo erst der Grund wird offenbar,
5 Der Grund, der ohne Grund thut Gründen,
Und in der Ewigen weite steht,
Worin das Ewige Ein, man findet,
Und in demselben wird erhöht;
Dich such ich, Dich verlang ich eben
10 O JEsu meiner Seelen Ruh,
Mein Einzig innig wahres Leben,
Drum schließ ich meine Augen zu;
Ach, laß dich finden, von mir armen!
Ach JEsu, meiner Seelen Schatz.
15 Ach thu' dich meiner doch erbarmen!
Und nimm in meinem Herzen Platz,
Ja nimm es ein, bewohn es eben,
Bewirke durch deine Geistes Kraft,
Und schaff in mir, ein neues Leben,
20 Gieb mir auch dazu Kraft und Saft.
O stilles Nichts, ganz ohne Sorgen;
Wo man Herz, Ohr und Aug, schließt zu,
Und Lebet in GOtt ganz verborgen,
In dir O JEsu, meiner Seelen Ruh. (Stoll, 175; Stoudt, 173)

The poem is not divided into stanzas and thus cannot be considered a hymn. The iambic meter is interrupted in line 9 to emphasize the initial "Dich," i.e., the eternal one, the object of the speaker's "ich." In line 22 "Herz," "Ohr," and "Aug" are stressed so as to put special emphasis on what we must deaden or close to let in Jesus.

The title announces the theme, the desired goal of the "ich." "Still" is a key concept for all mystics, as is "Ruh," which is found both in line 10 and in the last line. In line 10 Jesus is for the speaker the equivalent of silence, of peace. The culmination comes at the end when the "ich" lives hidden in God, in Jesus, and thus has found peace. Here we have the *unio mystica*, the goal of every mystic. But there is more. There is the "Eins" of line 3, the "Ewige Ein" of line 7 that one reaches "im nichts." For an explanation of the "Eins" we best turn to Angelus Silesius's *Cherubinischer Wandersmann*, specifically to the second alexandrine of book V:

Wie die zahlen auß dem Eins / so die Geschöpffe auß GOtt.
Die zahlen alle gar sind auß dem Eins geflossen;
Und die Geschöpff zumahl aus GOTT dem Einß entsprossen.

Stoll, then, like Angelus Silesius equates the "Eins" with God.

In another poem Stoll states:

Ach zieh' mich in den Grund hinein,
wo nichts geschaffnes mehr wird seyn. (Stoll, 170)

Here is the ground that has and does not have a bottom, a ground. Stoll uses an artful stylistic device to express the inexpressible, the essence of the eternal one, of God. Again, there is a parallel in the *Cherubinischer Wandersmann*:

Die GOttheit gründet kein Geschöpffe.
Wie tief die Gottheit sey kan kein Geschöpff ergründen:
Jn ihren Abgrund muß auch Christi Seel verschwinden. (V, 339)

A similar idea is found in a hymn in the collection of 1768 that contains works by Joachim Neander and other authors, a hymn that begins with "O Abgrund, thu dich auf: / O tiefe GOTTes=liebe, Ich schrey in dich hinein."⁴

In Stoll's poem to reach this non-place one must close one's eyes (line 13), even deaden one's heart, and shut one's ears (line 22). We turn to another poem by Stoll in which four lines amplify on the idea of being dead to the world:

Im innern Grund wo man nichts siehet
Von Selbst und Welt gefälligkeit;
Im innern Grund, wo man recht Fliehet,
Sich selbst, und all' vergänglichkeit. (Stoll, 174)

A parallel offers stanza 6 of hymn number 278 in the collection with works by Neander and other authors.⁵

Ach nimm mich ein, mein wahres leben;
Mein tiefes wohlseyn, meine ruh,

Laß mich nicht mehr zerstreuet schweben;
Ich schließ die matten augen zu:
Von allem ab, in dich hinein,
Diß soll mein stetes werck nur seyn.

Finally, there is an anonymous poem with the title "Das stille Nichts." Here are the first stanza and the last two lines of the last:

O tiefes Nichts, wer dich einst hat in sich gefunden,
Der ist fürwahr mit Gott und seiner Lieb verbunden,
Und hat die Ruhe schon allhier in dieser Zeit.
Und steht in allem Gott, und dessen Wink bereit.

...

Ich werde also dann je tiefer sinken ein,

Bis ich im { Ungrund=See } werd ganz ertrunken seyn.⁶
(Gottheitsmeer)

To be in the state of "Nichts" is what the speaker desires because then he would be with God and enjoy peace. There is also the image of the "Ungrund=See" in the last line of the poem that has its parallel in Stoll's "Grund, der ohne Grund" (line 5). In the anonymous poem the "Ungrund=See" is equated with the "Gottheitsmeer," i.e., with the divine.

In Stoll's poem the "ich" hopes to find peace for the soul. The poet combines mystical and pietistic notions when describing the search for the eternal "one," for the *unio mystica*. With its daring concepts, the attention to rhetorical devices ("der Grund, der ohne Grund thut Gründen") and the intensity with which the desire for peace is expressed, Stoll's poem must be considered an outstanding example of mysticism, certainly the best I have come across in German-American poetry.

The second poem I will analyze is by Heinrich Danner, whose dates are from 1742 to 1814. He lived in York County, Pennsylvania, just west of where Stoll lived, on a tract of land with the telling name "The Grieveous Valley." He was a scrivener, i.e., a writer of legal documents, as well as a respected leader of the Brethren Church.⁷ His brother Jacob also wrote religious poetry.

I have been able to locate only two poems by Danner, one clearly superior to the other.⁸ It is, like the one by Stoll, also found in Stoudt's anthology and is entitled "Ein Reise=Lied":

Was hat uns doch bewogen,
zu gehen aus von Heim?
Die Lieb' hat uns gezogen,
zu suchen die Gemein,
5 die GOtt der HErr gebauet,
in einem fremden Land:

- wir haben uns vertrauet
der starken Allmachts=Hand
2. Obschon Anfangs was kläglich,
10 Das Wetter auf uns fiel,
erreichen wir doch täglich,
bestimmten Ort und Ziel,
und haben noch darneben,
viel Gutes mancherley,
15 empfangen zu dem Leben,
weil uns der HErr stund bey.
3. Drum auf, ihr lieben Glieder,
zu loben unsern GOtt,
der uns bey unsern Brüder [*sic*]
20 gespeißt mit Himmels=Brod,
mit Manna aus der Höhe,
nach Herzens Wunsch und Lust.
Ach GOtt, dein Will' geschehe,
in meiner Seel und Brust!
- 25 4. Ach GOtt! thu uns erhören;
erquicke unsern Geist;
laß deinen Ruhm sich mehren,
so weit wir sind gereißt.
Laß deinen Ruhm sich mehren
30 bey Menschen groß und klein.
Ach GOtt, thu uns erhören,
und bring uns wieder heim.
5. Nun denn ihr lieben Glieder,
die Zeit bricht schnell herein,
35 daß wir uns scheiden wieder,
es kann nicht anders seyn.
Hier ist ein Jammer=Leben,
doch währt's nur kurze Zeit;
sich aber GOtt ergeben,
40 bringt Trost in Ewigkeit.
6. Auf, lieben Reißgefährten,
macht euch zur Reiß bereit;
laßt euch die Reiß=Beschwerden
jetzt noch nicht seyn verleid;
45 hier haben wir kein Bleiben,
hier haben wir kein Heim,
GOtt woll' uns fest verbleiben
in sich und seyn gemein.

7. Er woll uns auch erhalten
50 in Freuden und in Leid,
daß wir uns ja nicht spalten
in Zeit und Ewigkeit;
und woll' uns auch begleiten
durch seinen Engel fein,
55 daß wir uns ja nicht scheiden,
und bring uns wieder heim.
8. Nun denn ihr lieben Glieder,
Adje zu guter Nacht;
Wir scheiden jetzund wieder,
60 die Reise ist vollbracht,
die wir uns vorgenommen
und nun so weit vollbracht.
Ihr Aeltern sammt den Jungen,
auf ewig gute Nacht.⁹

In the introduction to his collection Stoudt asserts in reference to the above poem that "Several 'Journey hymns' like the one of Heinrich Danner's in our anthology survive, composed as thanksgivings for the safe arrival in the new world. . . . The dominance of the mystical love theme and the motivation for coming to America to find a haven for the sectarian fellowship are apparent" (Stoudt, lxxii). Don Heinrich Tolzmann agrees with Stoudt when he states that the poem was "written to justify migration."¹⁰ Finally, this reading is also found in an English translation:

What is it that has led us
Away from Germany?¹¹

The first two stanzas seem indeed to confirm this interpretation, that is, that Danner's poem is about emigration, the hardships of the journey, and the arrival in the new world. After all, what better topic could there have been than these unforgettable experiences of the immigrants? But a closer look at the entire text tells us that a "worldly" reading misses the mark completely, that Danner's references have uniformly and exclusively a religious meaning.

The world of the early German-American authors like Stoll and Danner was not centered on their specific circumstances, on specific events in their lives, but on what that life meant in their journey to what they hoped would be heaven. The title "Ein Reise=Lied" is already an indication of the way we should read the poem since Neander also has a "Reise=Lied." There the "ich" of the poem starts the journey trusting in God's protection and hoping that at the end he will be reunited with his brethren (Neander, 661). In another hymn the speaker wants to be in "der rechten heimat schooß," in "der neuen welt," in the "vaterland," i.e., with God since "Hier [in this world] bin ich fremd" (Neander, 251, stanza 2).

Danner's "Ein Reise=Lied" is concerned with the arduous journey of life, at the end of which he hopes God will bring him and his travel companions home again—"und bring uns wieder heim," a plea first stated at the end of stanza four and then again at the end of stanza seven. Readers today will tend to read this line as an expression of longing to be home again, of homesickness, but for Danner and his generation home ("heim") meant being with God. A fellow brethren, Johannes Preiss (1751–1829), expresses such longing for the divine *Heimath* in this beautifully worded poem:

- Von der himmlischen Heimath.
Einst fiel vom ewigen Erbarmen,
Ein Strahl in meine Nacht herein,
Und weinent ruht in Jesu Armen,
Ich aus, von aller meiner Pein.
- 5 Tief staunent schweigt mein Herze still,
Wenn es diß Wunder fassen will.
2. Nun weiß ich wo des Heimweh's nachen
Ein stilles Friedens=Eiland blüht,
Daß da der Heimath Fluren Lachen,
15 Wo aller Liebe Brenn=Zunft Glüht.
O heimweh! Fern und doch so Nah,
O selig! wer dich einmal sah'.
3. Drum seydt Gegrüßt, ihr Heimweh=Schmerzen,
Thut wieder was ihr einst gethan.
- 15 O zünde in dem trüben Herzen,
Der [*sic*] Himmels Sehnsucht lange an,
Dann macht mir des Erlösers Bild,
Daß Liebend alles Heimweh stillt.¹²

Both Neander and Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf have hymns in which the *Heimweh* motif occurs in the same religious sense. And while in the German-speaking countries that motif was used in a worldly sense—beginning with the Swiss as early as the sixteenth century and culminating with the Romantics—and in a religious sense, in this country we have to wait until the forty-eighters for an expression in poetic form of homesickness for one's place of birth.

Danner's poem is written in iambs with an irregular stress on "Auf" in line 41 to emphasize the speaker's exhortation to his fellow journeymen. Key statements are repeated: "Ach Gott, thu uns erhören" (lines 25 and 31) and "und bring uns wieder heim" (lines 3 and 56), the latter being the central plea of the speaker.

Much of "Ein Reise=Lied" consists of typical religious sentiments that need no explanation. The "Gemein" of line 4 is the *Gemeinde*, the community of the faithful, the Church. The "Glieder" of line 17 refer to the other

brethren. Stanza five introduces the concept of eternity. In that connection we have in lines 52f. the wish that the "wir" of the poem not be split into time and eternity, a wish that is repeated in line 55. Could this split mean that we are in danger of being concerned only with time, with this life, and thus lose sight of eternity? Angelus Silesius, too, has statements concerning time and eternity that seem to relate the two concepts as being one:

Die Zeit ist Ewigkeit.
Zeit ist wie Ewigkeit / und Ewigkeit wie Zeit /
So du nur selber nicht machst einen unterschied. (I, 47)

and:

Die Zeit und Ewigkeit.
Du sprichst: Versetze dich auß Zeit in Ewigkeit.
Jst dann an Ewigkeit und Zeit ein unterschied? (I, 188)

As I said above, Danner's poem contains many traditional Christian topics. However, some of these present opposing ideas, such as receiving manna from heaven "nach Herzens Wunsch und Lust" (lines 21f.), but still claiming "Hier ist ein Jammer=Leben" (line 37). The references to time keep shifting since we are both at the beginning and at the end of the journey. There is "macht euch zur Reiß bereit" (line 42) and also "die Reise ist vollbracht" (line 60). These apparently contradictory statements can only be understood when one realizes that in Danner's mystic vision matters of this world have only relative, impermanent values. Even time and space are not absolutely fixed entities.

The above interpretation is confirmed by Jeffrey L. Sammons when he describes the essence of mysticism:

[The mystic] becomes obsessed with the yearning to return into God, to reach the original union. . . . In order to find it [eternity], man must divest himself of his earthly attributes and discover within himself the *nihil*, the nothingness, which is true divine reality. . . . [P]lurality is an indication of incompleteness or illusion. Only in unity can perfection be found; and perfection is a quality of that which is one. . . . Time and place are unreal things of this world.¹³

From the above it is evident that Stoll's and Danner's poems express essential aspects of mysticism. The two poems are, as we have seen, carefully crafted with key lines that are repeated and final statements that bring initial ideas to a forceful conclusion. Between Stoll and Danner, the former is the more impressive creator offering images that are used to express the indescribable, i.e., God. Stoll, as in most of the other poems of the *Geistliches Gewürz=Gärtlein*, has the "ich" make the various statements. In this he parallels Angelus Silesius

and other mystics whose visions are of a very personal nature. Danner, on the other hand, uses the “wir” and is concerned with the other faithful and their journey through life. His poem ends in wishing a peaceful good night to the other brethren. Stoll’s “Das stille Nichts” in contrast, conjures up in a final vision the “ich” living on in God, in Christ, achieving *unio mystica*.

One can but marvel at the way Stoll and Danner—and Johannes Preiss belongs here, too—controlled the German language. Even though all three were born in this country, they were able to give form in flawless German to their religious visions in original images and word combinations rivaling their German predecessors.

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Notes

¹ *The Pennsylvania German Folklore Society* 20 (1955 [Allentown, PA: Schlechter’s, 1956]). References to this anthology will be “Stoudt” followed by the page number. Some of Stoudt’s transcriptions contain errors.

² See Donald F. Durnbaugh, *Church of the Brethren: Yesterday and Today* (Elgin, IL: The Brethren Press, 1986).

³ (Ephrata, PA: Johannes Baumann), 15. References to the *Geistliches Gewürz=Gärtlein* will be “Stoll” followed by the page number. Also Stoudt, 173. Stoll must have known Angelus Silesius since both titles, the first statements, and the moral associations of the four seasons agree in the following poem by Stoll and a verse in the *Cherubinischer Wandersmann*:

Die Geistliche Jahres=Zeith

Der Winter, ist die Sünd,
Die an uns ist Geerbet;
Die bringt die Arme Seel,
Ins Ewige Verderben.

Der Frühling aber macht,
Uns das Gewissen Rege,
Daß wir recht klein und weich,
Beweinen unsere Wege.

Der Sommer, bringt uns Gnad,
Daß wir GOtt fallen zu Fuße;
Der Liebe Gnaden Hand
Führt uns im Weg der Busse.

Der Herbst bringt uns in Stand,
Der Treuen GOttes Liebe.
Vollkommen in die Ruh,
In GOtt die Reine Liebe. (Stoll, 180; Stoudt, 173–74).

Die geistliche Jahreszeiten.
Der Winter ist die Sünd / die Busse Frühlingszeit /
Der Sommer Gnadenstand / der Herbst vollkommenheit.

Cherubinischer Wandersmann, ed. Louise Gnädiger (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1984), 5:18. Further references will be to the number of the book and the verse.

⁴Hymn number 252 of *Gott=geheiligt Harfen=Spiel der Kinder Zion: Bestehend in Joachimi Neandri sämtlichen Bundes=Liedern und Danck=Psalmen* (Cleve: Hoffmann, 1768, rpt. 1997). Gerhard Tersteegen edited this collection. Since according to the title page he added hymns by other authors, it is not clear whether the ones referred to here are actually by Neander. Future references are to "Neander" and the number of the hymn.

⁵See note 4.

⁶*Die Aufgehende Lilie* (Lancaster, PA: Wilhelm Hamilton, 1815), 179–80. Stoudt, 207–8.

⁷See Anna Godfrey, "Henry Danner," *Brethren Roots and Branches* 2:5 (March 1979): 10–14.

⁸Kenneth M. Shaffer, Jr., Director of the Brethren Historical Library and Archives in Elgin, IL, pointed out the poems. I chose for analysis the one contained in *Die kleine Lieder-Sammlung*. See note 9.

⁹*Die kleine Lieder-Sammlung* (Neu-Berlin, PA: Geo. Miller, 1832), hymn number 144. There are earlier editions. Stoudt, 18–20.

¹⁰*German-American Literature* (Metuchen, NJ, and London: Scarecrow Press, 1977), 9.

¹¹Donald F. Durnbaugh, ed., *The Brethren in Colonial America* (Elgin, IL: The Brethren Press, 1967), 558. The translator is Ora W. Garber.

¹²*Die kleine Perlen=Sammlung oder Auswahl Geistreicher Lieder*. J. E. Pfautz, ed. (Ephrata, PA: J. E. Pfautz, 1858), hymn number 28.

¹³Jeffrey L. Sammons, *Angelus Silesius* (New York: Twayne, 1967), 40, 46, 80.