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A New Perspective on Carl Schurz's Autobiography

Introduction

Although much has been said about Carl Schurz's remarkable life story and its impact on German-American history and culture, little or no attention has been devoted to the language, or rather languages, in which this life story was written down. When Schurz started working on his memoirs, he used his mother tongue to cover his youth in Germany, his involvement in the revolution of 1848, and his eventual exile in London. However, when it came to rendering his later political career in the United States (roughly from 1852 until 1870 – Schurz failed to finish the work before he died), he switched to English, the language of his country of adoption. Obviously, the work was never published in such a bilingual format. Around the same time, publishers in the United States and Germany brought out monolingual versions of Schurz's life story for their own national readerships. This article draws renewed attention to the bilingual dimension of the autobiography, which as I hope will result in a more profound understanding of Schurz's transnational identity and his role as ethnic mediator. [1]

Literary historians have normally classified Carl Schurz's memoirs as a work written in either German or English. The former option seems to have been more dominant in the early history of the discipline. Thus, in the third volume of the *Cambridge History of American Literature*, published in 1921, Albert B. Faust enlisted the work in a chapter on "Non-English Writings," because, although they continued to be widely read in the English translation, they "were first written in German" (586). What compelled Faust, a notable specialist on German-American culture, to classify Schurz's autobiography as a monolingual German-language text? A possible answer may be found in the context in which the *Cambridge History of American Literature* emerged. The work was the first large-scale effort to chart the development of American literature and played a key role in the credentialization of this young discipline. The encyclopedic outlook of the history, which now makes it seem rather dated, has to be related to the editors' desire to make American literature a worthy discipline for modern language philologists. What is remarkable, from our present-day perspective, is the work's receptivity towards non-English writings. Quite some attention is devoted to non-English authors whose work is now seldom discussed in literary reference works of this kind. This openness towards the multilingual traditions in the United States, however, did not lead the editors to integrate these traditions into the main narrative of the history. On the contrary, the English and the non-English strands were kept rigorously apart. All the non-English writers are discussed in separate chapters at the end of the history.[2] The American literary canon thus emerged in response to a looming identity crisis in American society after the Civil War. This crisis had everything to do with the changing ethnic make-up of the nation during a period of intense immigration.

All this may explain why the *Cambridge History* paradoxically combines an outspoken tolerance for ethnolinguistic diversity with what we would now see as an ethnocentric or even racialized view on American literature. In a sense, its focus on non-English writings was inversely proportional to their observed relevance to the core of

American literature: the lesser interference between the two, the easier it became to isolate the racial and linguistic characteristics that set the traditions apart. It is interesting that the current academic climate appears to display precisely the opposite dynamic. Scarcely anyone would now define American literature as the exclusive province of an English or British descent community. This heightened awareness of ethnic diversity as a constitutive marker of American culture, however, for the most part goes along with (one could even venture: is based on) growing ignorance of the multilingual heritage of the United States. Consider, for instance, James Craig Holte's *The Ethnic I* (1988), which highlights the contributions made by various ethnic authors (from Mary Anderson to Jade Snow Wong) to the autobiography as a quintessentially "American" genre. Holte also enlists Schurz, whom he describes as "an ideal mediator between the English-speaking mainstream and the growing German-American community" of the 1850s (154); In spite of this, there is no hint of the non-English component of Schurz's memoirs.[3]

If Faust's philological viewpoint misrepresented Schurz's autobiography by suggesting that it was originally composed entirely in German, Holte's identitarian viewpoint is equally misleading in that it erases the non-English background of the work. These shifting contexts of justification may help to account for why the non-English dimension of Schurz's autobiography has gradually been lost from sight. Without therefore denying the importance of intractable contradictions inherent in the politics of memory, we can perceive a marked shift in the overall origins narrative of American culture from a language-conscious ethnocentrism to what can be described as a nonlinguistic pluralism, i.e. a diversity model based on the unacknowledged hegemony of the English language as the common medium for expressing claims to diversity. This shift seems to have played itself out most dramatically in the German-American community, haunted as it was by the legacy of two World Wars. As Kathleen Conzen and other historians have convincingly pointed out, these political developments among other things resulted in the submergence of the German-American identity in the course of the twentieth century.

Schurz's Language Politics

Schurz has been mainly remembered as a fervent assimilationist who insisted on a good command of the English language as a necessary step in the Americanization of immigrants. During his lifetime, this assimilationist philosophy put him not only at odds with the nativists associated with the American Party who refused to take lessons from an "accented foreigner" on the value of "true Americanism," but sometimes also with the German-Americans themselves. For instance, Julius Goebel, a professor of German literature at the University of Pennsylvania, sharply criticized Schurz for ignoring the political demands of the German-speaking population in America. In a 1904 book entitled *Das Deutschtum in den Vereinigten Staaten von Nord-Amerika* Goebel applauded the efforts of the German-American Alliance to unify the German population in America, a development against which Schurz was strongly opposed. Only later, when the German-Americans were forced to tone down their claims to difference, did Schurz come to be seen unequivocally as the patron-saint of this ethnic community. Goebel himself made a remarkable U-turn in a 1928 lecture delivered at Yale University (and published the following year in the yearbook of the German-American Historical

Society of Illinois), in which he claimed a strong personal connection with Schurz and emphatically defended him against those who had claimed he had betrayed his people by downplaying his German roots.[4]

However, the concerted efforts on the part of German-Americans to project an image of Schurz as the model immigrant have obscured the complexity of his language politics. The strong reaction against the negative implications of assimilationism since the 1960s may have further exacerbated this misreading. For Schurz, American nationalism was by no means incompatible with a strong emphasis on the linguistic identity of the German descent community in the United States. Although he rejected the idea of a German political party as ludicrous, Schurz explicitly promoted the use of the German language in the private sphere. Thus, at a banquet in celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Deutscher Liederkranz, Schurz gave a much quoted speech on the importance of retaining the German language in the United States. In a turn that calls to mind the recent debate about the Spanish version of *The Star-Spangled Banner* (which, as the reader may recall, was nicknamed the "Illegal Alien Anthem"), Schurz stated (I use the English translation in Bancroft's edition of Schurz's speeches):

> The idea that the preservation of the German language together with the English may hinder the development of our American patriotism is as silly as it would be to say that it makes us less patriotic to be able to sing *Hail, Columbia* in two languages. (Schurz 1913, 336)

Schurz further stressed that the German-Americans had "a sacred obligation" to cultivate their mother tongue, and that doing so would make them better instead of lesser Americans (338). For Schurz, therefore, national pride and bilingualism were not mutually exclusive terms but rather presupposed each other. The Americanization of the immigrant was by no means a zero-sum game.

All this may have played a role in Schurz's decision to write his life story in both his mother tongue and the language of his adopted country. Here is how he explains this choice in the introductory pages of the first American edition, published by McClure in three volumes:

> When I began to write these reminiscences of my youth, I attempted to do so in English; but as I proceeded I became conscious of not being myself satisfied with the work; and it occurred to me that I might describe things that happened in Germany, among Germans, and under German conditions, with greater ease, freedom, and fullness of expression if I used the German language as a medium. I did so, and thus this story of my youth was originally written in German. (RI, 4)[5]

Although he quickly became fluent in English after his arrival in America (at least according to the dominant myth about his persona), Schurz long retained a reserve towards this language.[6] During his exile in London, he considered English to be an "unmusical" language which he would never be able to master (RI, 337).[7] Although his move to the United States made him change his mind about this, he remained convinced that some things could be better expressed in German, such as philosophy, poetry, and intimate conversation (famously, a sign on his door read: "Hier wird

deutsch gesprochen"—"German spoken here"). Schurz thus retained a sense of cultural superiority vis-à-vis America, an attitude he shared with many other forty-eighters.

Schurz knew that no publisher would accept a bilingual autobiography, so he hired his friend Eleanora Kinnicutt as his "coworker" for the preparation of the McClure edition (5).[8] As the term "coworker" suggests, Kinnicutt did more than just translate the German original; She also helped Schurz to conform his autobiography to the expectations of the American readership by making occasional changes to the tone of the text, and by shortening or extending passages. Meanwhile, Schurz had asked his daughter Agathe to translate the second part into German (she received help from her sister Marianne and Mary Nolte, a family friend) for publication by Georg Reimer in Berlin (now De Gruyter). Like Kinnicutt, Agathe made considerable changes to the original manuscript (in fact, she did the same with Schurz's correspondence, from which she deleted many references to his political and personal problems). In an introductory note to the second volume of the Reimer edition, she admits having shortened or omitted specific passages "die ein spezifisches Interesse für den amerikanischen Leser haben" (LII, vi).[9] She further explains her father's choice to write in both English and German as follows:

> Es war natürlich, dass meinem Vater bei der Aufzeichnung seiner Jugenderinnerungen die Muttersprache in die Feder floss. Als er aber seine Erlebnisse in der neuen Heimat und die politischen Ereignisse in Amerika beschreiben wollte, bot sich ihm unwillkürlich die englische Sprache, die ihm in dem neuen Wirkungskreise geläufig geworden war und die es ihm gestattete, seine Gedanken über diese Verhältnisse prägnanter auszudrücken. (v)[10]

Agathe's explanation is interesting in that it provides the exact mirror image of Carl's own motivation from which I quoted earlier. Here, it is the English language that almost willy-nilly ("unwillkürlich") forces itself upon Schurz while writing his autobiography. In both cases, a quasi-automatic link is presupposed between the national significance of certain experiences and the medium through which they are expressed.

If it is indeed the case that Schurz's decision to write his autobiography in both German and English is somehow significant for his political views, then it seems rather ironical that we have at present no edition of the autobiography available which renders Schurz's life entirely "in his own words," i.e., in both German and English. Clearly, although he never saw the autobiography in print (only excerpts were published in serial form by *McClure's Magazine* during his lifetime), Schurz did consent to the translation as well as the editing of the manuscript, which he realized had grown longer than expected. This, however, does not therefore make a scholarly reconstruction of the memoirs any less interesting and necessary. Given that, in the present conjuncture, assimilationism and bilingualism are seldom thought together, a bilingual edition of Schurz's autobiography could help to re-invigorate debates about multilingualism in the United States by suggesting the possibility of a third choice between what are all too often presented as irreconcilable extremes.

Moreover, we should take into account that Schurz's "loose" authorial policy at least to some degree has to be regarded as a strategy of self-representation peculiar to the autobiographical genre. Thus, Schurz's initial assertion that his memoirs should be read

primarily as a "family memorial," designed to entertain his children about the "strange and stirring adventures" of his youth, creates a familiar tension between the public and the private, or the published and the unpublished, which indirectly serves to underwrite the integrity of the account (3). When reading this *captatio benevolentiae* it is hard not to be reminded of the famous opening words of Franklin's *Autobiography*, which read: "My dear son..."[11] However, posthumous editions of Schurz's autobiography, including numerous abridgments and popular editions, have taken Schurz's words rather literally and have used them as a warrant to justify considerable revisions to the manuscript, often with the explicit intention of inscribing Schurz's remarkable adventures into a given ideological formation. This process of rewriting is interesting in itself. A new edition of the memoirs, explicitly thematizing the divergences between the different-language versions, could bring this process to the fore and thus draw attention to the shifting transatlantic relations between the United States and Germany and the role of German-America as mediator between the two cultures.

The "Fuguism" of Autobiography

I have now indicated why the bilingual nature of Schurz's memoirs has been forgotten and why this matters. The last part of the article will illustrate some of the divergences between the different-language versions of the work. The analysis will be based on a comparison of the first volumes of the McClure and Reimer editions. Since the first part deals with German conditions, it speaks for itself that the Reimer edition comes closest to Schurz's original design (his handwritten drafts are on deposit at the Library of Congress). We can also assume that the extent to which the McClure edition departs from the Reimer edition will reveal something about the different contexts of justification in which these two "first" editions emerged. In my opinion, there are at least four ways in which the McClure version significantly modifies the German narrative. In mounting order of importance, these changes have to do with: (1) terms or phrases unfamiliar to the American reader; (2) references to the German cultural heritage and sociopolitical climate; (3) allusions to Schurz's reputation in Germany; and (4) passages that explicitly thematize the issue of language.

An example of the first category is the omission of a sentence in which Schurz talks about his days as a "Quartaner," which is the old term for a pupil in the third year of German secondary school derived from the Latin scale that numbered the years backwards, and which corresponds to the sixth grade in the United States (LI, 65). Since most American readers at the beginning of the twentieth century were not acquainted with the Prussian school system, the McClure edition drops references to it from the text.[12] If such changes do not greatly affect the overall narrative, highlighting them may point attention to some of the cultural peculiarities that informed Schurz's transition from one world to the other as well as the means through which this transition was encapsulated in a (supposedly) continuous narrative. Another way in which the McClure edition accommodates unfamiliar words is, paradoxically, by leaving them untranslated. Not coincidentally, many of these non-English terms reflect class or social divisions peculiar to German society at the time, such as "Burghalfen" (a tenant farmer working and living in a castle) or "Burschenschaft" (fraternity). These untranslated words may have provided a way of spicing up the narrative for the American reader without therefore making it so foreign that it becomes unintelligible.

The second type of modifications has to do with references to peculiarly German conditions. During his school days in Cologne, Schurz witnessed a number of knight dramas. The Reimer edition discusses some of these plays quite extensively and includes, for instance, a reference to the then famous actor Wilhelm Kunst. In the McClure edition, this passage is entirely missing. Such omissions bring out the cultural frame of reference in which Schurz was brought up and help to explain some of the more or less implicit oppositions (what linguists would call the common ground) underpinning his narrative (e.g., class-conscious Europe vs. democratic America). The third set of changes has to do with Schurz's reputation in Europe during and after the revolutionary period. At the start of chapter eight in the Reimer edition, where Schurz recounts his life as a political refugee, we read the following sentence: "Es ist später erzählt worden, ich habe damals Deutschland in einer mich unkenntlich machenden Verkleidung durchreist" (LI, 262).[13] Here, Schurz qualifies one of the many legends that circulated in Germany after his liberation of Gottfried Kinkel from Spandau prison. In the United States, these heroic deeds were perhaps less known, and consequently Schurz's references to his reputation have been reduced to a minimum.

But the most interesting divergences between the Reimer and the McClure edition are those where the narrative more or less directly reflects on its own medium. This is the case, for instance, in the passage where Frau Kinkel in her letters to her imprisoned husband informs him about his imminent rescue in a coded language that is consciously made unintelligible to the Spandau censors:

> Sie habe ihm über ihre musikalischen Studien geschrieben und in ihren Briefen spielten lange Auseinandersetzungen über die 'Fuge' eine große Rolle. Kinkel habe ihr nun in einer ihr verständlichen, aber den Gefängnisbeamten, welche die Briefe revidierten, unverständlichen Weise angedeutet, daß er die Bedeutung des Wortes 'Fuge' (lateinisch 'fuga', deutsch 'Flucht') sich gemerkt habe und begierig sei, über dieses Thema mehr zu hören. (LI, 284)

In the McClure edition, this scene is rendered as follows:

> She had written to him about her musical studies and put into her letters long explanations about the word 'fuge.' Kinkel had made her understand by words which were unintelligible to the officers who reviewed his letters, that he appreciated the significance of the word 'fuge,' Latin, 'fuga,' English, 'flight,' and that he was anxious to correspond more with her upon that subject. (RI, 274)

The secret word play centers on the etymological link between the German word "Fuge" (a polyphonic musical composition) and the Latin "fuga" (flight). In the English language edition, however, this form of doublespeak loses much, if not all of its force. The McClure edition translates "Fuge" as "fuge" (RI, 274), an archaic term that is now only used as a suffix (as in "refuge") and that has a different spelling and pronunciation than the musical term "fugue," which follows the French usage. As a consequence, the Latin root of the word is here much less apparent than in the German version.

However minor the linguistic divergence – a mere "u" –, it should be clear that if Kinkel had been imprisoned in the United States, the escape plan may never have

succeeded, either because he would not have understood the hidden signal or because the guards would have deciphered it too easily. In my opinion, all this makes the recovery of the bilingual nature of Schurz's memoirs an interesting and highly relevant project. The point, however, is not just to show that Schurz's life story has been badly translated, or that his "authentic" identity has been corrupted. Rather, I have tried to highlight the often neglected role of translations in the construction of autobiographical selves and the way they are enshrined in distinct national imaginaries. In medical dictionaries, "fuguism" denotes a form of psychological amnesia resulting in confusion about one's identity or the assumption of a new one. In the present context, the word can be operationalized to refer not just to the recursive forgetting of Schurz's bilingual identity, but also to the contrapuntal or dual nature of his memoirs. My aim in this article has been to bring the common root of this double, apparently contradictory movement – the expression of as well as the flight from a polyvocal identity – to the fore.

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Notes

[1] I am currently preparing a new edition of Schurz's memoirs (to be published by Peter Lang in the series New Directions in German-American Studies under the direction of Werner Sollors), which will reproduce the original manuscript in its bilingual format.

[2] Nothing is said, for instance, about James Fenimore Cooper's influence on Friedrich Gerstäcker, or Charles Gayarré's on Kate Chopin, or, for that matter, the connections between the Jewish *skitze* writers and the representatives of the "American" short story.

[3] Current studies about language in the United States usually lack historical depth in that they focus almost exclusively on the rise of Spanish. See, for instance, the entry "bilingualism" in the *Greenwood Encyclopedia of Multiethnic American Literature* (2005), which exclusively equates bilingualism with a relatively recent body of Spanish-language writings.

[4] As Goebel put it: "Die so urteilen, wußten offenbar nicht, wie treu er im Herzen seinem Volkstum immer blieb" (Goebel 1929, 106). "Those who think this way were apparently unaware of the fact how in his heart he always remained faithful to his people." (All translations from the German are mine except otherwise indicated.)

[5] For convenience sake, I will use "R" as a short-hand for the McClure edition and "L" for the first German edition.

[6] Schurz's account of how he learned English without the help of a grammar (purportedly by reading *The Philadelphia Ledger*) clearly impinges on the American ideology of the self-taught man. However, his unwillingness to learn English before coming to the United States may be an indication of the fact that initially, and contrary to what the autobiography suggests, he did not intend to stay there for very long, but planned to return to Europe "when's wieder losgeht" (Easum, 60).

[7] Although he enjoyed reading Shakespeare in translation, when attending a performance in London, Schurz strongly objected to "the impure vowels and the many sibilants, the hissing consonants, in fact, the whole sound and cadence of the English language" (RI, 337). While in America, Schurz learned English by translating passages from the *Letters of Junius* into German and then back to English, for comparison with the original. Schurz's views on language closely resemble those of some of the German romantics, who saw German as a world language. Johann Gottlieb Fichte claimed in his *Reden an die deutsche Nation* (1807) that the German "can always be superior to the foreigner and understand him fully, even better than the foreigner understands himself" (quoted and translated by Edwards, 26).

[8] It is difficult to ascertain whether or not Schurz envisioned a German-language audience in the United States. This certainly seems to have been the case for Henry Villard, whose memoirs were published in 1904 and appeared in a German edition (also by Reimer) two years later. Already in 1902, however, a German-language version of the first part of the autobiography, dealing with Villard's – or rather Hilgard's

– youth in Germany, had come out in the United States, apparently to serve a German-American readership (the manuscript, written in Sütterlin, is now on deposit in the Horner Library of the German Society of Pennsylvania).

[9] (...) "which are of particular interest to the American reader."

[10] "It was only logical that, when my father wrote down his reminiscences of childhood, he used his mother tongue. However, when he decided to record his experiences in the new homeland and the political events in America, the English language spontaneously forced itself upon him. This language, which he had come to use in his new working environment, allowed him to express his thoughts about those events more succinctly."

[11] In this regard, it is interesting that the first American edition of Franklin's autobiography was a retranslation from the French.

[12] I should note that the translation is not entirely consistent. On the next page, the word "Tertia" is left untranslated (RI, 66).

[13] "It has later been told that at the time I traveled through Germany in disguise."

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