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“Der Linie folgend, schrieb entzückt ich: Blau”:
Tradition and Modernism in the Poetry of Walter Bauer

I

If statistics are to be trusted, blue is by far the most popular color both with (German) men and women.¹ This is not surprising: we live on the “Blue Planet,” we are surrounded by the blue sky, the blue seas, by blue mountains and blue distances. Germans speak of “blau machen” and “ins Blaue fahren,” they often “reden das Blaue vom Himmel herunter” and “erleben ihr blaues Wunder.”

The special significance of the color blue reaches back to the known origins of mankind. Since times immemorial, blue has been the color of the gods. Marduk, the highest god of the old Babylonians, the Persian god Mithras, the Egyptian goddess Isis, the Germanic god Wotan – all were clad in a blue robe. Hinduism imagines the beginning of the world as a blue light, and an elephant painted blue serves as a symbol of divine inspiration. Similarly, in ancient Egypt, a blue hippopotamus was considered to possess the power of bestowing life. Tibetan Buddhism sees blue streaming forth from the heart of the god Vairocana and forming the highest spiritual essence, the primal form of all consciousness. In Christian religious painting, “Himmel-Blau” (blue as the color of both “sky” and “heaven”) symbolized the wisdom and power of the divine creation emanating and descending from above. As the color of both Christ’s and Mary’s mantle, blue served to symbolize the revelation of the divine presence on earth. In Renaissance landscape painting with its newly introduced perspective, the symbolic function of the color blue became an expressive one: it now served to depict distance and openness of the natural setting.

This effect was described more precisely by Goethe in the sixth “Abteilung” of his “Farbenlehre,” completed in 1807:

Diese Farbe macht für das Auge eine sonderbare und fast unaussprechliche Wirkung. Sie ist als Farbe eine Energie; . . . ist in ihrer höchsten Reinheit gleichsam ein reizendes Nichts. Es ist etwas Widersprechendes von Reiz und Ruhe im Anblick.

Wie wir den hohen Himmel, die fernen Berge blau sehen, so scheint eine blaue Fläche auch vor uns zurückzuweichen. Wie wir einen angenehmen Gegenstand, der vor uns flieht, gern verfolgen, so sehen wir das Blaue gerne an, nicht weil es auf uns dringt, sondern weil es uns nach sich zieht.²

To Goethe, the color blue was an energy which, as it seems to recede into the distance,

beckons the eye to follow it. Similarly, Schiller ascribed to this color an elevating power. In the thirteenth stanza of his philosophical poem "Das Ideal und das Leben," he wrote:

Aber in den heitern Regionen,
Wo die reinen Formen wohnen,
Rauscht des Jammers trüber Sturm nicht mehr.
...
Lieblich, wie der Iris Farbenfeuer
Auf der Donnerwolke duft'gem Tau,
Schimmert durch der Wehmut düstern Schleier
Hier der Ruhe heitres Blau. (lines 1-3; 7-10)³

But there is a difference. Goethe's "sinnlich-sittliche" perception of colors remained firmly rooted in a nature symbolism that centers around light. To Schiller, the color blue, as it appears in the higher regions of "pure form," evoked the vastness of the universe and with it the freedom of the mind to ascend and create its own spiritual universe. As Angelika Overath explains: "[Diese Farbe] öffnet die Sphäre des Ideals nach oben, wo früher ein Himmel . . . eine Weltordnung sichtbar verbürgte, und führt ins Innere, in die freie 'Heiterkeit' des Künstlers, aus der heraus die 'Kunst des Unendlichen' entsteht."⁴ The color blue "opens the realm of ideals upward" and elevates the artist to a higher state of "serenity" from which he may draw his "infinite" art.

From here, it is only one small step to the romantic poet Novalis who saw the poet's task as one of "poeticizing the world" ("Poetisierung der Welt") – of intensifying and transforming man's experience of the world and raising it to another sphere. In his novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1802), Novalis employs the motif of the "blaue Blume" in his protagonist's transformation from a burgher's son to a poet. The blue flower first appears to Heinrich in a dreamscape saturated with blue light; as he later leaves his father's house and departs into the blue distance, he has a strong sense of being on his way "home" to his "Vaterland"; when he encounters Mathilde he recognizes in her face the blue flower of his dream; in a second dream, he and Mathilde embrace under the blue waves of the river, and with her kiss she passes him "ein wunderbares geheimes Wort" which fills his entire being. Would this "wonderful mysterious word" continue to live within him even after the dream has ended – and make him a poet? Novalis did not complete the novel.

Be that as it may, in this novel fragment, as elsewhere in his works, Novalis has assembled some significant symbols: the loving woman and the (blue) flower, the latter bowing as if in greeting to the onlooker – both encountered in a setting of either blue light, mostly emanating from a blue sky, or blue water. These images represent various aspects of the complex notion of poetic creativity which together they symbolize. The flower and the woman embody a "feminine" force which, as it generates life and beauty, is the source of poetic creativity. The blue light or sky bear witness to the otherness of the state of mind such creativity involves, and to the clarity and transcendence it may afford. Water, the fluid element, brings to this symbolism the all-important dimension of "Auflösung" – of dissolving, melting, fusing. The implications here are twofold. As in music, this may be a process of resolving rigid and/or discrepant structures in harmonious form: poetry. On an existential plane, this may be a process by which the

“poeticized” self is dissolved and fused into oneness with the universe. All of the images serving this complex symbolism – woman, flower, sky and water – are blue or bathed in blue. This color, then, is the unifying element and eidetic hallmark of a symbolic complex developed by the Romantic poet to render poetically the agency of a creative force that he hoped would “poeticize the world” and restore human life to the original oneness of all being.

The nineteenth century with its bent towards realism and scientific precision was not inclined to embrace any idea of such transforming power of poetry. It was up to the Impressionists to revive in their paintings of air and light the symbolism of colors, and of the color blue. The Expressionists, too, as they strove to bring about a spiritual renewal, were quick to seize on the psychological effect and transcending power of blue. They clearly picked up the thread spun by their classical-romantic forefathers. In his pioneering book *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (1910), Wassily Kandinsky wrote the following:

Die Neigung des Blau zur Vertiefung ist so groß, daß es gerade in tieferen Tönen intensiver wird und charakteristischer innerlich wirkt. Je tiefer das Blau wird, desto mehr ruft es den Menschen in das Unendliche, weckt in ihm die Sehnsucht nach Reinem und schließlich Übersinnlichem.⁵

This recalls Goethe’s description of the color blue as “energy.” And both the “yearning for purity and transcendence” and the synaesthetic aspect of Kandinsky’s perception of the color blue hark back to the romantic sensibility:

Musikalisch dargestellt ist helles Blau einer Flöte ähnlich, das dunkle dem Cello, immer tiefer gehend den wunderbaren Klängen der Baßgeige; in tiefer feierlicher Form ist der Klang des Blau dem der tiefen Orgel vergleichbar. (Overath 22)

German lyric modernism continued to spin the blue thread. Stefan George (“Blaue Stunde”), Rainer Maria Rilke (“Blaue Hortensie”) and Georg Trakl (“Kindheit,” “An Novalis”) gave us notable examples. George’s poem “Blaue Stunde” (1899) is particularly interesting. The title served to acknowledge and confirm a new artistic convention: “Blue Hour” was the name given to late-afternoon gatherings set aside for conversation and reflection away from quotidian concerns. The color blue with its special “energy” – its beckoning effect, its intensifying power and evanescence – effectively points to the otherness of an hour that may bring, for its short duration, deep inner experience:

Sieh diese blaue stunde
Entschweben hinterm gartenzelt!
Sie brachte frohe funde
Für bleiche Schwestern ein entgelt. (stanza I)

Wie eine tiefe weise
Die uns gejubelt und gestöhnt
In neuem paradiise
Noch lockt und rührt wenn schon vertönt. (stanza IV)⁶

The "happy finds" of this "blue hour" continue to "beckon" and "move" as "a deep melody" would do even after it has ended. This is a clear pointer to poetry, associated since Novalis's blue flower with the color blue: to the joys of poetic creativity and its long lasting effect.

No other poet has made the color blue "his" color as did Gottfried Benn, the principal mediator and initiator of modern lyric poetry in post-war Germany.⁷ Even though in his influential lecture "Probleme der Lyrik" (1951) he emphatically rejected "Farbadjektive" as cheap clichés "die besser beim Optiker und Augenarzt ihr Unterkommen finden," he confessed in the same breath his passion for the color blue: "In Bezug auf eine Farbe allerdings muss ich mich auf die Brust schlagen, es ist Blau—" (VI, 18).⁸ The title of his well-known poem "Blaue Stunde" (I, 246-7), clearly borrowed from Stefan George, serves to bring to his poem the notion of the profound otherness of an intensely experienced hour of fulfillment. However, the borrowing also serves to accentuate a significant difference. While George, at the turn of the nineteenth century, could exult in "frohe funde" afforded by such a "blue-hour" and enjoyed long after the "hour" has ended, Benn, in the middle of the twentieth century, could only reap from it a vague and evanescent "Kunde" of something existing beyond the confines of words, beyond the confines of consciousness:

Wir wissen beide, jene Worte,
die jeder oft zu anderen sprach und trug,
sind zwischen uns wie nichts und fehl am Orte:
dies ist das Ganze und der letzte Zug. (I, stanza 2)

Du bist so weich, du gibst von etwas Kunde,
von einem Glück aus Sinken und Gefahr
in einer blauen, dunkelblauen Stunde
und wenn sie ging, weiß keiner, ob sie war. (II, stanza 3)

"Was sich erhebt, das will auch wieder enden,
was sich erlebt – wer weiß denn das genau,
die Kette schließt, man schweigt in diesen Wänden
und dort die Weite, hoch und dunkelblau." (III, stanza 2)

The erotic encounter here rendered seems to be an apt metaphor for an experience that yields intimations of worlds beyond the lexicon of common discourse: one inner realm ("Glück aus Sinken") and one distant realm ("dort die Weite"). The logic of contrast suggests that both these realms are places where other words, poetic words, may be found.⁹ Significantly, both realms, the inner and the distant one, are symbolically described as blue. No feat of imagination is required to recognize the imagery here employed as a modern vehicle of the old twin-notion of poetic creativity as possessing a "feminine" and a "masculine" dimension. Indeed, to Benn, the word "blue" with its long literary tradition encompasses the entire complex of poetic creativity. Describing the creative process, he elaborates:

Da wäre vielleicht eine Befreundung für Blau, welch Glück, welch reines
Erlebnis! . . . nun kann man ja den Himmel von Sansibar über den Blüten der

Bougainville und das Meer der Syrten in sein Herz beschwören, man denke dies ewige schöne Wort! Nicht umsonst sage ich Blau. Es ist das Südwort schlechthin, der Exponent des "ligurischen Komplexes," von enormem "Wallungswert," das Hauptmittel zur "Zusammenhangsdurchstoßung," nach der die Selbstentzündung beginnt, das "tödliche Fanal," auf das sie zuströmen, die fernen Reiche, um sich einzufügen in die Ordnung [des Gedichts]. (VI, 25-6)

Translated into plain words, this means: "thinking" the word blue sets in motion an imaginative process of calling up the manifold denotations and connotations this word may yield, of breaking up given contexts of meaning and association, and creating new ones. All this, of course, is predicated on wide-ranging knowledge and life-experience, on a readily "inflamed" imagination and a special linguistic sensitivity.

Benn envisions this newly created, "poetic" context or "order" as a concise structure devoid of discursive or descriptive detail, but pregnant with implication and association; as a structure depending not so much on syntactic elaboration as on the expressive power of the word. The word is used as a "cipher" – a "Chiffre," "eine stilistische Figur" (VI, 25) whose encoded riches are to be explored by the reader.¹⁰

Specifically, the word blue, embraced as such a "Chiffre," calls up in the poet's mind the range of meaning and the evocative richness it has accumulated in the course of its long history: the purity, absoluteness, (masculine) spirituality and transcendence of the sky; the deeply primordial, fluid, life-giving (feminine) force of the ocean. Both these dimensions – one metaphorically located in the culturally rich Mediterranean sphere, the other in the natural and exotic realm of "the south" – are seen to be active agents of the creative process. Clearly, this latter can no longer aim at a "Poetisierung der Welt," but it may grant moments of pleasure ("Glück"), moments enriched by a "Transzendenz der schöpferischen Lust" (VI, 14), by a temporary liberation of the creative mind – the poet's as well as the reader's – from the tribulations of our fractured modern existence.

II

What does all this have to do with the German-Canadian poet Walter Bauer? No doubt the most significant Canadian immigrant writer hailing from Germany, Bauer (1904-1976)¹¹ remained firmly rooted in the German literary tradition. His continued use of German even after his emigration to Canada is the most obvious indicator of this unbroken connection. His choices of themes and poetic means, too, remained in large measure indebted to his German heritage. No wonder, then, that he availed himself repeatedly of the tradition-laden symbol "blue." An examination of its various uses in his poetry will not only provide evidence of Walter Bauer's lasting German-ness but, more importantly, yield insight into the historical context of his poetic work.

In his unpublished manuscript "Atemzüge" (1971)¹² we find the following thought-provoking poetic miniature:

Linie auf einem Blatt
Der Vogel, der dem Blick vorüberschoss
Gedankenschnell und schattenlos,
Als trage Botschaft er von wo? wohin?

Zog eine Linie durch den Raum genau
Und strich sie auch durch meinen Sinn.
Der Linie folgend, schrieb entzückt ich: Blau. ("Atemzüge" 50)

It is easy enough to see that this short poem tells of a happy moment of inspiration received unexpectedly and inexplicably. The enigmatic message suggested by the bird's flight, the onlooker tracing its direction, his joy about the gift thus received, his eagerness to write it down – all these are images frequently used by Bauer, as will be shown later in this essay. But what are we to make of the word "blue" written down as a consequence of this inspirational moment? We may think of the sky as both the backdrop of the bird's flight and the goal of the mental process it has set in motion. The word "blue," then, appears to serve as an intra-textual symbol. Thanks to its emphatic end-position, however, it points strongly beyond the text, thus acting as a signal, as a sign or "Chiffre" that calls for further exploration. We are back to Gottfried Benn. On 23 February 1976, Walter Bauer wrote in his diary:

Gestern nachmittag die großartigen Gedichte von Gottfried Benn – Gedichte, Melancholie, Verse – gelesen. Bis auf den frühen Brecht (und einige der älteren): nichts kommt ihnen gleich; nicht an Ton, nicht an Fülle der Existenz. ("Tagebuch" 66)¹³

The mature Bauer's positive assessment of Benn's poetry, which in earlier years had been alien, even abhorrent to him, may come as a surprise. It has been briefly discussed by this author in the context of the apparent affinity of Bauer's "Hieroglyphe," exemplar of expressive precision, and Benn's "Chiffre."¹⁴ In the poem here considered, Bauer uses in plain "primärer Setzung" (Benn) the ancient *Hieroglyphe* and modern *Chiffre* "Blau" to evoke the entire body of classical-romantic-expressionist thought that was outlined in the introductory paragraphs of this essay. Surely, Walter Bauer, the professor of German literature, was aware of these connections; the poet Bauer utilized them for his creative purposes: not simply adopting what he found, but blending it with his own brand of thought and imagery developed over many years of poetic practice.

As Bauer himself has pointed out, in his early "proletarian songs," published in 1929 (*Kameraden, zu euch spreche ich*) and 1930 (*Stimme aus dem Leunawerk*), there were only two colors: black and red – calling out, stammering, demanding ("[sic] riefen, . . . stammelten, . . . forderten" [*Stimme* 126]). On close inspection, we encounter the color blue three times. In two of these cases it simply forms part of a realistic description: in the poem "Verbraucht" (*Stimme* 98), a "blue pot" with some food is placed in front of a person completely worn out by work and misery; in the poem "Streik" (*Stimme* 103), a bluish coat of machine oil is seen on the waste water of the factory. Only once does the color blue serve a more important expressive function: as a sight desired by a factory worker surrounded by walls and wires: "Laß mich doch Bläue sehn, wenn Sommer naht, / ich bin doch Mensch" ("Pfortner im Werk" [stanza 2, lines 3-4], *Stimme* 53). Buried in the soot and rust of the "Leunawerk," this is a first pointer to the "delightful blue of the sky" ("das köstliche Blau des Himmels") which was to feature prominently in the poet's later works.

For some time to come, however, this "Sohn der Erde" was taken by the color green, which by the evidence of the poems contained in the two slim volumes *Gast auf Erden*

(1943) and *Dämmerung wird Tag* (1947) poured forth from his pen during the years of war. Green was a sign of life, of blossoming, of hope. The ocean, too, was green (“Ein Sommervers,” *Gast* 20). Where “der Himmel” did not prompt thoughts about the loss of religious assurance, the poet described the sky as silken, gentle, wide – never blue. The sky was a source of light and yearning, but never in association with the color blue. Even in his *Blaues Oktavheft* (1953), Bauer described the sky as cool and free and delicately green (“Treffpunkt,” *Oktavheft* 20).

However, it was in this “blue” volume of poetry, the first one written in Canada, that the “greater” sky of Spring was finally given back its traditional color: “Botschaften erglänzen in seinem Blau” (“Alles fängt wieder an” [line 8], *Oktavheft* 31). From now on, the poems collected in *Nachtwachen des Tellerwäschers* (1957), *Klopfzeichen* (1962) and *Fragment vom Hahnenschrei* (1966), depict the sky as “blue” in a variety of shades of color and meaning: deep, pure, clear, delightful, perfect, untouched, cool. The ocean, too – significantly the Mediterranean Sea nostalgically remembered by Italian and Greek immigrants – is now “blue” (“Franco,” *Nachtwachen* 19; “Fährt Odysseus noch immer,” *Nachtwachen* 39). To be more precise: the sea is “veilchenblau” (“Franco” [line 8]). May this be a first allusion to the lost “südliches Reich” of the “blue flower”?

To return to the volume *Blaues Oktavheft* and the blue sky that seems to hold out messages (“Botschaften”) to the onlooker. Here a theme is struck that runs like a leitmotif through Bauer’s entire Canadian poetry. In the third of his “Kanadische Verse” (*Oktavheft* 80), he gives us this image:

Heute morgen in der Sterling Road

...

fand ich eine Vogelfeder
und hob sie auf.

...

Ich sah empor.
Über mir der blaßblaue Morgenhimmel
war voll unermeßlicher Freiheit. (III [lines 1; 3-4; 10-12])

This is the first notable example of a motif complex whose elements Bauer was to use again and again in varying combination: the sky is a pure blue surface that brings out clearly the pattern and direction of a bird’s flight, which latter yields to the sensitive mind a message or an inspiration and, with the “Feder” (both “feather” and “quill”) it sends down, an invitation to write. Also in *Oktavheft* (22) we read “von der Linie unbeschreiblich zart und kühn, / die ein Vogelflug an die Tafel des Himmels schreibt” (“Singen in alten Maßen“ [lines 21-2]). A similar image is found in *Fragment* (113): “Wie rein / Die Schrift / Früher Vogelflüge / Auf der kühlen Fläche / Des Himmels” (“Die Berichte über den Ausschwitz-Prozeß lesend,” XIII [lines 1-5]). In the unpublished poetic cycle “Morgen, Tag und Nacht: hell” (1965), the message written by the bird into the blue of the sky is “light”:

Ein Blitz
Schoss durch das Blau:
Ein Vogel –
“Welche Botschaft?”

Schrei ich ihm nach.
Das Echo seines Schattens zittert:
Licht. (VI, UP)¹⁵

In the cycle "Im Innern der Stadt," (*Lebenslauf* [1975], 82-85), the poet, as he reflects on the messages written by the birds into the cool blue sky, is unexpectedly greeted by a passer-by; he sees a familiar "Gesicht" (both "face" and "vision") and promptly seizes on this greeting as a "Glücksfeder" sent to him for the purpose of returning the greeting:

Unerwartet
Sagt eine Stimme "Hello".
Ich schaue auf, verwirrt,
Ich sehe ein bekanntes Gesicht.
Eine goldene Glücksfeder
Schwebt vom Himmel, ich fange sie auf.
"Hello – Hello", sage ich. (XII, *Lebenslauf* 85)

What in this poetic context he "says" is what his writing is all about: it is "mein . . . Gruß für meine Freunde und für Unbekannte" ("Tritt ein, hier lebe ich" [line 32], *Nachtwachen* 58).

An important aspect of Bauer's blue-sky imagery is the sense of freedom which the sight of the blue sky evokes:¹⁶ "unermessliche Freiheit" ("Kanadische Verse," *Oktavheft* 80), "Freiheit des Fluges" – freedom of flight, freedom of the creative mind:

Die Karte mit einer japanischen Zeichnung,
In einer Buchhandlung zufällig gefunden,
Zeigt weiter nichts als in wolkenlos leichtem Blau
Eine Wildgans in einem großen
Leicht hingetuschtem Ringe,
Die ohne Zweifel die Sonne bedeutet.
Das ist genug: Freiheit des Fluges
Im Raum, den ich nie größer sah
Als auf diesem Blatt. ("Unendliches Blau," UP [1968])

Evidently, not only the natural sky, but also the sky mediated through art may be a source and prompter of the creative impulse:

Und an der Wand ein Druck von Georges Braque, dem Meister . . .
Wie tief das Blau ist, Bläue eines Himmels ohne Sorgen,
...
Und dann ein Vogel noch – Phönix? Der uns Botschaften bringt
Vom Feuer, in dem man brennen soll, um herrlich und verwandelt
aufzuliegen? ("Tritt ein" [lines 16-17; 21-2], *Nachtwachen* 57-8)

The last line confirms – albeit in the form of a question – the idea of the transforming and elevating power of creativity which the poet wishes to convey through his blue-sky imagery. The mythic bird Phoenix, repeatedly imagined by Bauer as a deliverer

of important information, points to the “masculine” component of creativity often rendered as a movement towards a goal, either along the curved line of a bow: “Gold war deines Fluges Bogen” (“Ein Morgenlied” [stanza 2, line 2] *Gast* 97), or along the straight line of an arrow: “Der Vogel schoß hinaus – ein Pfeil ins Licht” (“Frühling” [line 10], *Oktavheft* 19).

At the same time, the phoenix-image with its suggestion of death through fire and subsequent emergence of new life, reinforced by the easily imagined “Rauschen” of his wings, also brings into play the “feminine” component of creativity. Its most obvious mediator, however, remains the “blue flower”: the African violet in the window of the “elderly man” asked about his favorite color:

Auch Blau möchte ich nennen,
Es ist die Farbe
Der afrikanischen Veilchen
Auf meinem Fensterbrett,
Die Farbe eines zarten Saluts,
Der mich oft und beglückend
Unerwartet traf.

(“Interview mit einem älteren Mann,” V [lines 12-18], *Fragment* 90)

With this declaration, the “elderly man” Walter Bauer seems to acknowledge his romantic forefather Heinrich von Ofterdingen who over a century ago had been struck and moved by the tender face of Mathilde – the face of the blue flower, the symbol of love which in co-operation with poetry was to change, i.e., to heal the world and return it to the transcendent oneness of being. Bauer’s (undated) poem “Frühjahrsgruß im Februar” confirms the poetic impulse which he, the modern poet, receives from his “blue flower” – “[s]ein altes Veilchen”: “. . . wie gut sich ‘Blau’ auf diesem Blatte schreibt” (line 9). But times are radically different. Gone is the belief in the possibility of transforming and thereby improving the world:

Das Blau des Himmels, winters lange mir verborgen,
Fand ich im Blau von Blüten, die mein altes Veilchen unerwartet treibt.
Es ändert nichts (man ist jetzt so auf ‘Verändern’ aus).
Es sagt – wenn es denn etwas sagen muss – : auch ich bin Licht vom großen
Quell,
Ich bin ein Gruß von fernem Frühjars- fernerem Sommermorgen;
Ich bin nicht dunkel (dunkel ist der Grund, aus dem ich komme): ich bin
hell
Und bin so eifrig wie verschwiegen nur auf Blühen aus. –
Das ist’s; nicht weniger, nicht mehr. Was noch?
O ja: wie gut sich ‘Blau’ auf diesem Blatte schreibt.

(“Frühjahrsgruß im Februar,” UP)

Gone, too, is any idea of, or hope for, other-worldly fulfillment. All we have is life here and now, to be embraced here and now. To the poet, the flower eager simply to blossom, thus bringing light into this world, is image and example of his own mission.

Bauer’s this-worldly stance is effectively brought out by the color symbolism of the

poem "April: Das Blau" (*Auf Erden und im Licht* [1962]).¹⁷ The speaker tells us that in order "to find the light," he need not see "den Himmel," the latter being "windverwühlt": ruffled by the winds of change. Instead, he is moved by the sight of violets and their "other blue" which "die Erde," without being begged – by prayer, one might add – has prepared with the best of life-giving sap:

Dem alten Blick gibt sich uraltes Wunder neu:
Ich brauch den Himmel, um das Licht zu finden, nicht zu sehen,
Ich muss nur, ein paar Stufen ab, zum Frühjahrgarten gehen;
Zum regenfeuchten Schwarz beug ich mich – schau:
Wie trifft mich da der Veilchen tiefes (o du schönes Reimwort) Blau.
Es ist ein anderes Blau, als uns April bei windverwühltem Himmel schenkt,
Die Erde hat es winterlang mit bestem Saft getränkt;
Als wir in Weiss und Eis und Grauem fast erstarben,
Da bildete die Erde ungefragt den Glanz von blauen Farben. (lines 1-9)

"Das Blau" no longer beckons the human spirit to fly up and away into a transcendent "Vaterland." It is a gift of the earth, "meinem Heimatorte" (line 15), found a few steps down in the garden, a place of human culture. No longer being perceived as an elusive energy holding promise of ultimate fulfillment, "das Blau" is the color of a living being that acts, with cyclical reliability, as a harbinger of the earth's "green" life and the inner peace it would afford:

Ein Aufschlag wie von Augen wortlos, stummer Blick
Streift sanft das Alter von mir ab und füllt mein Herz mit Glück.
Oder was ist es, das mich, Blau empfangend, sprachlos macht
Und wie ein Kind in mir das Schwinden meiner Zeit verlacht?
"April" rief ich, "April," der Mutter zu, „die Veilchen sind schon da.“
So jedes Jahr. Wie fühl ich mich der Erde, meinem Heimatorte, nah.
Ein neuer Schritt im Jahr dem Blühen, das nie ausbleibt, zu.
Nun wart ich auf das Gras: im Grün zu liegen und zu atmen Grün
in erdumschlossener Ruh. (lines 10-17)

In the face of a universe disenchanting by science and technology, of a universe we know so well as to be unwilling even to imagine an erotic attraction between a flower and a cosmic being,¹⁸ we embrace the value of purely human mutual care and love, and declare these – "durch die (blaue) Blume," as Germans might say – to form the center and the goal of our striving:

Afrikanisches Veilchen in meinem Fenster
Nicht gerührt vom Mond, den man erreichte –
Und man weiß nun: unbewohnbar, unbewohnt –
Trägt das Veilchen, unversehns in Blüte, seine leichte
Blaue Last, die sich zu tragen lohnt.
Lohnt für wen? Für mich, der lang besorgte
Seines Wachsens Tag und Schlaf,
Bis ihn, nicht als Lohn: als Gabe dieser Sterne Aufgang traf. ("Atemzüge" 70)

Where a cosmic connection is still seen to exist, the color blue does not evoke any vision of an undivided world to be regained, but nostalgic images of a time when a small part of the world was experienced as whole:

Blau

Ein Strauß Kornblumen dunkelblau,
Ins Fenster vor die Nacht gestellt,
Darüber voll der Sommermond,
Bringt mir, vom Wind bewegt, ein Kindheitsfeld,
In dem mit Hase, Rebhuhn, Lerche ich gewohnt.

(“Atemzüge” 21)

A cursory reading of this unassuming text is unlikely to attribute to its title “Blue” more than personal¹⁹ or atmospheric value. But as we have seen, by the time Bauer wrote this poem, he had made his favorite color blue a favored poetic tool, fusing personal associations with the expressive and evocative richness the word “blue” had received in the course of its long poetic service. We may safely assume that Bauer here employed it for the wealth of associations it may bring to bear on his poetic snapshot of late-night or end-of-life or modern-day nostalgia.

We have returned full circle to the mature Bauer’s use of the word “Blau” as a “Chiffre” in the complex evocative way which Gottfried Benn had recovered from past tradition. As did Novalis, as did Gottfried Benn, so did Walter Bauer seize on this ever-significant color and gave it center place in a symbolic complex of images that was to hold up the importance and redemptive power of poetic creativity. While the romantic imagination had created a vision of a progressive improvement and ultimate transcendence of the world through poetry, its modern counterpart was content to embrace moments of intense temporal pleasure. While the romantic poet could lay out his vision in beautifully worded detailed images and phrases, the modern poet, sobered by the changed realities of his time, preferred to seek concise expressiveness: to favor implication over description, the terse “Chiffre” over the elaborate image.

This “modern” method of using the poetic word as an evocative sign rather than a vehicle of clearly formulated meaning was alien to Walter Bauer for most of his creative life. In venturing to write such “suggestive” rather than “communicative” poems, the mature poet undertook a first significant step in the direction of modern poetry as we know it from the works of Benn, Trakl, Celan and others. In this process, the “Reizwort” (Benn) “Blau” with its rich tradition and evocative power may have helped to put Bauer on this track. Significantly, in his later works he generally displayed a growing preference for precise poetic structures that imply more than they elaborate. Witness, for example, this exquisite love poem:

Einst, jetzt:

Als ich sie traf,

War sie schön.

Nach 25 Jahren

Ist sie viel schöner:

Damals sagten es viele.

Jetzt bin ich es, der es sagt. (“Tagebuch” 66, 29 August 1976)

Bauer's creative endeavor was abruptly ended by his early death that came at a time when he was determined more than ever before to surprise his readers with "great masculine" poetry: "Die großen Gedichte kommen noch," he wrote in his diary on 18 April 1974 ("Tagebuch" 63). The "great" poetry he had in mind may well have been the concisely expressive kind we have discussed above. A remark entered into his diary just a few months prior to that fateful 23 December 1976 affirms this possibility: "Schärfe des Messers; Präzision einer chinesischen Pinselzeichnung – Präzision muß nicht zu einer Kürze führen, die den Atem erstickt und tödlich ist" ("Tagebuch" 66, 29 August 1976). We shall never know how far Walter Bauer, had he lived longer, would have "follow[ed] the line" that points the way to the pregnant precision signified by "Blue."

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Notes

¹ Blue: 38%; red: 20%; green: 12%. – "Beliebteste und unbeliebteste Farben," <http://www.metacolor.de/farben/lieblingsfarben.htm>.

² *Goethes Werke*. Hamburger Ausgabe in 14 Bänden, ed. Erich Trunz (München: C.H. Beck, 10. Auflage 1974-7). Vol. 13: Naturwissenschaftliche Schriften, eds. Dorothea Kuhn and Rike Wankmüller (1975): 498.

³ *Schillers Werke*. Nationalausgabe, ed. Norbert Oellers (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger 1983). Zweiter Band, Teil 1: Gedichte 400.

⁴ Angelika Overath, *Das andere Blau: Zur Poetik einer Farbe im modernen Gedicht* (Stuttgart: Metzler 1987): 27. - My summary of the thematic treatment of the color blue in literature and art from Romanticism to Modernism is drawn from Overath's excellent discussions.

⁵ Quoted from Overath 22.

⁶ Stefan George, *Werke*. Ausgabe in zwei Bänden (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta 1984). Band 1: 208.

⁷ See Reinhold Grimm, *Gottfried Benn: Die farbliche Chiffre in der Dichtung* (Nürnberg: Hans Carl 1962).

⁸ Gottfried Benn, *Sämtliche Werke*. Stuttgarter Ausgabe in Verbindung mit Ilse Benn. Band 1-6, ed. Gerhard Schuster et al. (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta 1986-2001).

⁹ Overath, too, urges to look beyond the obvious eroticism of Benn's "Blaue Stunde," arguing that this poem renders the "other" hour in which words are born and the poem is created (159-78).

¹⁰ See Angelika Manyoni, "Das Gedicht aus Worten, die Sie faszinierend montieren": Gottfried Benn's Conception of "Poetic Montage," *German Life and Letters*, New Series 36.4 (1983): 329-46.

¹¹ Prior to his emigration in 1952, Walter Bauer had been a well established author. Hoping to safeguard the integrity of his poetic work, he left Germany when intellectual and literary developments were moving in a direction he could no longer follow. Within Canada, his continued use of German drastically reduced the number of his potential readers: most of those among whom he lived could not read his work, and his intended readers in Germany ceased to care for his "old-fashioned" ideas and concerns. Even though he never stopped writing, the deeply committed humanist Walter Bauer remained little known in the New World and was virtually forgotten in the Old. In Canada, poet and friend Henry Beissel made some of his poetry available in English translation (*The Price of Morning*, [Vancouver/Victoria: Prism International 1968]; *A Different Sun*, [Ottawa: Oberon 1976]). In Germany, Hans-Martin Pleßke's tireless efforts led to the reissue of *Stimme aus dem Leunauwerk* (originally 1930) by Reclam/Leipzig in 1980. More recently, Günter Hess and Jürgen Jankofsky issued an eminently readable selection of poetry and short prose-works by Bauer, *Sonnentanz: Ein Walter-Bauer-Lesebuch* (Halle/Saale: Projekte Verlag 188, 1996). On the academic front, Johannes Maczewski's pioneering essay "Auf der Suche nach dem NICHTS: Zu Walter Bauers Kanada-Gedichten" (*Yearbook of German-American Studies* 19 [1984]: 133-53) was followed by two articles from the pen of Bauer-specialist Walter Riedel: "Das literarische Kanadabild: Ein Vergleich zu ausgewählten Werken von Walter Bauer und Henry Beissel" (*Deutschkanadisches Jahrbuch* 9 [1986]: 183-97) and "Scribo, ergo sum: Walter Bauer, Diarist" (*Seminar* 23.3 [1987]: 236-50). In an effort to rescue this "important author" from undeserved oblivion, and marking the 90th anniversary of his birthday, Walter Riedel and Rodney Symington brought out the first book-length study on Walter Bauer, *Der Wanderer: Aufsätze zu Leben und Werk von Walter Bauer* (Bern-Frankfurt a.M.-New York: Peter Lang 1994) – a collection of both reprinted and original essays on Bauer's life and work. Five years later, Angelika Arend presented her monograph, *Documents of Protest and Compassion: The Poetry of Walter Bauer* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill Queen's University Press 1999; now also in German: *Mein Gedicht ist mein Bericht: Zum lyrischen Werk von Walter Bauer* [Halle/Saale: Projekte Verlag 188, 2003]). The 100th anniversary of Bauer's birthday saw the publication of his long awaited biography, *Walter Bauer – ein Lebensweg von Merseburg nach Toronto* (Halle/Saale: Projekte Verlag 188, 2004), written by Günter Hess. Both Riedel's *Wanderer* and Hess's *Lebensweg* contain comprehensive

lists of primary works by, and secondary works on Walter Bauer. Finally, in 1994, the cities of Merseburg and Leuna established a Walter-Bauer-Prize that has since then been awarded on a bi-annual basis either to poets writing in the humanist spirit of Walter Bauer, or to scholars who have made a significant contribution to the understanding and promotion of Bauer's life and work.

¹² To support and encourage my work on the poetry of Walter Bauer, Henry Beissel, to whom Bauer had entrusted his unpublished papers, has given me a copy of this typed manuscript. I acknowledge this gift with thanks.

¹³ "Tagebuch aus Kanada." Heft 1-66 (1952-76). Unpublished Manuscript (Marbach am Neckar: Deutsches Literaturarchiv). – All quotations from these diaries are made with permission by Günter Hess, who is administering Bauer's literary estate.

¹⁴ Arend, *Documents* 124-5; 131-3; *Mein Gedicht* 236-40.

¹⁵ The text of this unpublished poem, along with other unpublished material relevant to my topic, was passed on to me by Günter Hess specifically for the writing of this essay. His generous help is here acknowledged with thanks. – All citations drawn from this source are identified as UP.

¹⁶ It is interesting to note that the association of blue (haze seen in an open Italian landscape) and an elevating sense of freedom was made by Bauer as early as 1938 in a review of Henry Benrath's "italienisches Reisebuch" *Welt in Bläue*: "Als wir zum ersten mal auf der Höhe eines Alpenpasses standen und nach Süden in das bläulich verhangene, offene Tal hinabsahen, . . . stand nicht vor uns der Beginn grenzenloser Freiheit?" (In: *Die Literatur* 41 [1938-39]: 122.)

¹⁷ The date of the "Monatskalender" *Auf Erden und im Licht* was established for me by Günter Hess, who had received an undated copy from Walter Bauer in 1963. In Bauer's correspondence with Hanne Peters, Hess found, and relayed to me, these comments: "... Die Verse: August: Das Brot schrieb ich gestern für meinen Monatskalender. Im Dezember wirst Du dann das Ganze bekommen." (13 August 1962) And: "... Ich hoffe, dass unterdes mein Weihnachtsgruss bei Dir eingetroffen ist. Es ist nicht viel, ein Zyklus von Versen, je ein Gedicht zu jedem Monat; und jeden Monat schrieb ich eins; jedes war, für mich selber, ein Versuch Schwärze, Melancholie, Erschöpfung abzuschütteln und von ihrem Gegenbild zu sprechen; also spricht jedes, auf seine Weise, vom Licht." (6 January 1963). – This Calendar, furnished with illustrations by Claudia Leyh, has now been brought out by Jürgen Jankofsky (Halle/Saale: kreativ büro e.V. 1998).

¹⁸ As for example the yearning of a lotus-flower for the moon in Heinrich Heine's poem "Die Lotosblume," which thanks to Robert Schumann's musical setting enjoys widespread popularity to this day.

¹⁹ "Kaufte gestern einen kleinen Strauß Kornblumen von dem Jungen an der subway. Ihr Blau traf mich: so rührend war es. Sie stehen jetzt im Fenster. Wenn ich sie ansehe, denke ich an Kornfelder." ("Tagebuch" 60, 2 October 1970).

