

Angelika Arend

**“Es tut so gut zu lieben und ganz wieder Mensch zu sein!”:
Some Comments on Else Seel’s Love Poetry**

What prompted Else Lübcke (1894-1974), a spirited young woman in her early thirties, to turn her back on Berlin’s effervescent cultural scene and plunge into the isolation and unimaginable loneliness of a log cabin in the backwoods of British Columbia? After the devastation of the war years she had managed to secure employment and earn a livelihood for herself, her widowed mother and an elderly aunt. She was able to take university courses and satisfy her intellectual hunger. She enjoyed the friendship of like-minded young people—students, artists, co-workers—going to the theatre, to concerts and art exhibitions; hiking through various parts of Europe, reading, writing, debating. She even had a first taste of literary success when some of her poems and short stories began to be published in 1921. Why then did she, in August 1927, surprise and surely shock her own mother by placing on the table her hair, cut off and wrapped in tissue paper, together with a ticket to Canada, announcing curtly: “Mutter, kein Lamentieren; hilf mir schnell packen, denn in einer Woche muß ich von Hamburg mit der ‘Empress of Australia’ nach Quebec fahren” (“Letzte Pionierin” [1960], UM 13)?

Rodney Symington, who has given us an insightful first account of the life and work of this extraordinary woman, suggests that she was one of numerous “Europamüde” —European writers and artists plagued by scepticism about the value of their civilization (1984, 17). Much as Else Lübcke may have shared current Rousseauistic notions about the purity and freedom to be found in the New World, and much as “she seems to have associated in these years with artists and writers who shared a radical, antibourgeois bias” (Symington 1984, 19), there is insufficient evidence in her own writings that this translated into a disappointment deep enough to prompt her fateful step. On the contrary, her own—albeit retrospective—accounts of her last years in Berlin speak of her happy participation in the *Jugendbewegung* of the early 1900s and the bustling cultural scene of Berlin, and of the hope for a “Pan Europa” she shared with her friends. Here is one telling excerpt:

Kunst löst sich auf in Kreisen und Körpern,
 Dichtung bricht sich in freien Worten Bahn.
 Studenten sind wir und wollen
 Pan Europa und 2 Dutzend Parteien rufen
 zum Wählen. Neue Prediger predigen,
 neue Maler malen und die
 Theater erbeben in Dramen und Musik.
 Wir kommen zusammen und teilen
 das trockene Brot und einige Äpfel,
 wir tanzen und lieben und ziehen
 am Wochenende hinaus vor die Stadt,
 in Ferien hinaus in die Berge. Junge
 Männer und Mädchen, ein freies anständiges
 Geschlecht . . .
 Freunde sind da. Aus Hörsaal, von Reisen
 aus den Konzerten und dem Büro der
 Rentenbank. Hier arbeite ich im Archiv
 und wir hoffen, die Rentenmark [wird]
 der Inflation Einhalt gebieten.
 ("Voller Glanz war die Kindheit" [1956], UM 3/5/3)

As the text continues, it points strongly to primarily personal reasons for her decision to leave Berlin:

Immer noch lebe ich mit den Alten
 und kann mich zu keiner Heirat entschließen.

Jupiter kommt von Norden, Thor
 mit Donner und Blitz und führt mich
 hinauf in die Sterne. Europa
 liegt ihm zu Füßen und er liegt
 mir zu Füßen. Feuer und Schwert
 teilen mir Herz und Blut,
 und mein Blut: es düngt die Erde.
 Lächelnd trägt er meine Worte in
 ein kleines Buch meiner Gedichte
 an denen ich fast gestorben wär.

Da schneid ich die Haare ab, da gehe ich fort.

There is evidence in her poetry and prose that for some time she may have felt trapped by her obligation to care for "[die] Alten" referred to in the lines above.¹ Furthermore, the excerpted lines identify—as explicitly as Else Seel ever allowed herself to write about this all too personal matter—the factor which in all likelihood triggered her

drastic move. It was the trauma she experienced in the wake of her disappointed love for the Danish writer Martin Andersen Nexø. Symington does make reference to this fateful affair, but by saying that “he [Nexø] seems to have treated her somewhat callously” (1984, 20), he chose to understate politely the catastrophic dimensions of the wound inflicted on this spirited thirty-two-year-old woman.² To put it a little more bluntly, she was struck to the core by the hurt and humiliation of having been used for a pleasant diversion by a man—her senior by twenty-five years—whom she admired and loved, and driven to utter despair over the abortion of his child.³ It is fair to assume that this radical break was a desperate attempt to create a clean slate that would enable her to make a fresh start and go on living. Romantic notions about the New World, “growing disenchantment” with the Old, “the narrow confines of her domestic and professional situation, her advancing years, . . . and her independence of spirit” (Symington 1984, 20) may well have added fuel to the fire. A fitting part of this drastic method of turning things around was her marriage, on arrival in Vancouver, to the prospector and trapper George Seel, a farmer’s son from Bavaria who had left his father’s farm at age fifteen and eventually made his way to British Columbia where he enjoyed a life of freedom, challenge and adventure.⁴

One cannot but marvel at Else Seel’s strength of mind and body that carried her through hardships we cannot even begin to imagine: a marriage to a mostly absent husband who, when present, tolerated her reading and writing with a smile and never showered her with signs of his love; a life of household chores infinitely more demanding than those she never even had to do in the gentle conditions of a European city; a social setting—or what social life existed among the settlers—totally uncongenial to a person with intellectual and creative interests and aspirations. How did she manage to survive?

First, at one point Else Seel mustered her considerable powers of will and determination to make a fundamental decision which helped her not only to go on, but to appreciate and even love her difficult life. Here, in poetic guise, is her own explanation:

Tief wie Ackerfurchen schnitten
Kummer, Sorge, Einsamkeit
durch des Herzens Mitten,
furchend meine Wesenheit. (St. 1)

(. . .)

Aber wie die liebe Sonne
leuchtend über Berge steigt,
habe ich siegend mich der Wonne
und der Liebe zugeneigt. (St. 3)

(. . .)

Meine Glieder wurden freier,
und des Herzens Stimme schwang
jubelnd, frisch und neuer
mit dem Menschheitssang. (St. 5)

Scheu und Kargheit überwindend
bot ich brüderlich die Hand,
und mich selbst verbindend
fand ich das gelobte Land! (St. 6; *AW* 37)

What she had demanded of her mother she now decided to practice herself: to stop lamenting, to accept the facts and get going. This meant changing her own attitude and opening her mind, heart and hand to her new surroundings; it meant accepting people and things as they were and learning to "love" them. As a result, an invigorating sense of freedom was gained—a freedom from imported ways of looking at the world that were no longer valid in the new context; a freedom that opened her eyes to the presence of human qualities and values about which she may have known little or nothing before. The poem "Haus im Urwald" spells it out:

Haus im Urwald, Stamm an Stamm,
Sonne, Mond und alle Sterne
wölben einen Himmelskuppeldamm
bis zum Nordlicht in die Ferne.

Erde spinnet ab die Jahreszeiten,
Kriege kommen und vergehn;
hier im Raum, in kleinen Weiten
bleibt die Menschlichkeit bestehn.

Einfach Leben, Haus und Sein,
Du kannst keine Dinge größer machen,
Menschenlust und Menschenpein
wachsen nur aus Weinen und aus Lachen.

Hier wirst Du mit Freud empfangen,
ein geehrter Gast, tritt ein.
Wohin immer Du gegangen,
hier wirst Du willkommen sein. (*AW* 26)

Life in the wilderness is lived in a natural enclosure that reaches from the earth to the sky. Its rhythm is regulated by the alternation of day and night ("Sonne, Mond" 1,2) and the change of the seasons "spun by the earth" (2,1). While here, at the behest of cyclical nature, the distant skies will be lit by the dancing flames of the northern lights, in the world at large similar spectacles are caused by recurring conflagrations of

uncontrolled emotions ("Kriege" 2,2). Living in the bush, however, leaves no room for inflated emotions or undue aggrandizement ("Du kannst keine Dinge größer machen" 3,2). The happiness and the sorrow people do, of course, experience, are of natural "human" proportions ("Weinen und . . . Lachen" 3,4). As a result, the "Haus im Urwald" has remained home to unmarred humaneness ("Menschlichkeit" 2,4) which manifests itself in the fellowship and respect that are joyfully extended to anyone who may step under its roof. In Symington's cogent words, "in the backwoods of Canada, stripped of sophistication and superficiality, life is more real, more immediate, more sharply defined" (1984, 24). Such insight and experience surely helped Else Seel to adjust to her new life and even to learn to "love" it.

Second, and somewhat ironically, the extended periods of solitude she had to endure gave her time for reading, reflecting and writing—certainly more than she would have had in her husband's continual presence. His side of their marital bed was usually packed with reading matter that was only removed for the short periods of time he spent at home. In addition to the books she had brought with her, "she read avidly anything that came her way: Canadian newspapers, American magazines, English-language books, German publications sent to her by friends in Germany. She wrote poetry and prose, including articles for German newspapers" (Neering, 228); she kept a diary and, of course, wrote letters to various correspondents—the most notable among them being Ezra Pound (Symington 1986; 1989). Needless to point out the therapeutic value of writing—channelling emotional and intellectual energies into the effort of verbalizing and, hopefully, communicating extraordinary experiences and observations

Else Seel, then, managed to make her peace with her life as a settlerwoman and to continue pursuing her intellectual and creative aspirations. As a result, she wrote an impressive body of poetry and prose, much of it offering a valuable firsthand account of the life of one group of Canada's early settlers. As Symington explains, Seel's pioneer literature successfully "capture[s] in diary, in poems, and in short stories the nature of pioneer life, and also . . . distil[s] out of it its universal significance" (1984, 30), thereby offering more than mere documentation of social history (34).

Another sizable part of her writings, particularly of her poetry, transcends the confines of pioneer life and deals with universal experiences, such as love, aging, transience, death. The dominant theme clearly is love: one third of Seel's entire poetic output (64 poems out of 181) consists of love poems. We remember that it was "love" which precipitated her decision to cut herself off from the cultural stimulation Berlin had to offer; and it was the determination to "love" which facilitated her assimilation into the cultural void of Wistaria, British Columbia. Love clearly was central to her very existence: "Süße Liebe, tausendmal / halt ich dich umfangen, (. . .) Süße Liebe—ohne Dich / Leben ist nichts mehr für mich!" exclaimed the septuagenarian ("Süße Liebe" [1970], UM 3/6/16). It can be no surprise that in her poetic production she returned time and again to the theme of love, reflecting on its many different faces, and casting them into a variety of poetic forms.

Examining a few of these love poems, this essay will seek to determine whether Else Seel's love poetry measures up to the standard set by her pioneer poetry. Specifically,

the question to be addressed is this: Did this poet in her self-imposed isolation from cultural influences and creative interchange, in dealing with a topic close to her heart, create verbal artifacts of lasting value—poems that contain, each in its own way, what Symington (1984, 27) has called “a small but priceless gem of human significance”?

As indicated above, thematically Seel's love poems span a wide spectrum of kinds and facets of love. It is seen as a fundamental human emotion which no cleverness or worldly wisdom can suppress or satisfy: “keine Erdenweisheit stillt / unser Lieben und Bemühen” (“Iris,” UM 13). In its purest form, it is the motive-force of such archetypes as the loyal wife (“Ich bin Dein Weib,” UM 13) and dedicated mother (“Mutter und Kind,” UM 13). In its more widely defined understanding as erotic attraction between a man and a woman, it is marked by an ever-present tension between its physical and its spiritual side: “Und wie soll ich mich denn wehren / gegen dies Hinab, Hinan? / Bet ich doch an zwei Altären / Liebe himmlisch-irdisch an” (“Himmlisch-irdische Liebe,” AW 41). This complex emotion may bring or entail various experiences: first love - never forgotten; falling in love—the sweetness, the tension, the pain; the excitement of fulfilled physical love; the near impossibility of complete oneness; the transience of love; the many farewells; the many new attempts; the irrelevance of age; disappointment, betrayal, venality; and, coming back full circle, the redeeming power of love. In the following pages a small selection of poetic texts dealing with some of these issues will serve to illustrate.

Let us begin by taking a look at what Else Seel has to say about the archetypal loyal wife: “Ich bin Dein Weib” (UM 13). The very word “Weib,” rather than “Frau,” has an archetypal ring to it, laying the groundwork for an understanding of the poem that goes well beyond the personal.⁵ Secondly, Seel's “Weib” seems, at first glance, to be a classic example of interlingual contamination caused by the English cognate “wife,” denoting “married woman.” In German, a woman declaring herself to be “your wife” would normally use the epithet “Frau.” Etymologically, the word “Weib” carries the basic meaning of “being other than male” and has in the course of its long history been charged with a host of progressively contemptuous denotations and connotations, ranging from “servant” to “bitch.” Reading Seel's poem carefully, one cannot but conclude that she used “Weib” instead of “Frau” quite deliberately, thereby creating a powerful subtext.

The poem begins with the affirmation, “Ich bin Dein Weib” (1,1) and continues with a description of the speaker going out early in the morning to collect cedar branches “um Deine Peitsche zu flechten” (1,3). Surely, Else Seel had read her Nietzsche and knew about Zarathustra's advice, “So du zum Weibe gehst, vergiß die Peitsche nicht!” Indeed, the second stanza dwells on the “gnashing” sound caused by the knife cutting the strips of cedar to make strips for the “whip”:

“Ich hörte keinen Laut
nur das Knirschen des Messers,
(. . .)

Es knirschte zwischen weißen Zedersträhnen;
es knirschte beim Zerteilen
der weißen Strähnen für Deine Peitsche. (2,2-7)

These lines strongly suggest a gnashing of teeth associated with pain caused, conceivably, by the whip, mentioned here for the second time. The third stanza goes on to speak of tears—tears incapable of washing off the sweet smell of the cedar branches on her hands whose duty and pleasure it is to serve:

Am frühen Morgen sammelte ich Zedernzweige:
süß, süß war ihr Geruch,
sie waren naß mit Tränen.
Die Süße will nicht von meinen Händen weichen,
(. . .)
Tränen waschen nicht die Süße fort -
ich habe wohlriechende Hände für Deinen Dienst. (St. 3)

The straw of solace the speaker appears to cling to is that “ah, manchmal wirst du sanft sein . . .” (4,1)—there will be occasional moments of gentleness. But ever since she met him, she has experienced deeply rooted pain (“Kleine Wurzeln des Schmerzes sind tief in mir / seitdem ich Dich in meiner Türe stehen sah” [4,2-3])—yet she has done her duty, night and day:

Ich löschte Deine Fackel,
ich flocht Deine Peitsche,
ich bin Dein Weib! (4,4-6)

In 1921, the young Else Lübcke had written:

Mein Vater war Landwirt und trank Schnaps und las Reisebeschreibungen
um das Leben auszuhalten. Meine Mutter war sein bestes Dienstmädchen
und verlor unter ihm den Stolz und die Fähigkeiten einer alten Familie.
Ich trinke keinen Schnaps und beschreibe meine eigenen Reisen aber Stolz
und Fähigkeiten sind in mir wie junge Hunde und halten jedes Leben aus.
(“Abziehbilder,” UM 10)⁶

Given the fact that Lübcke-Seel’s writings, with very few exceptions, are all based on autobiography, one wonders what happened to the “pride” the young woman flaunted as one of her inalienable qualities. But her “abilities” to “endure any life” surely stayed with her and helped her to even find sweetness in the difficult service she had taken upon herself. Also in the early twenties, on the back of an (undated) Easter greeting from her Berlin address at Birkbuschstr. 85, Else Lübcke had presented herself as “Die Schnecke” (UM 13): of noble birth and moral integrity, serious, distinguished, and, as the last of the three stanzas tells us, steadfast in her love:

Wie alle Wesen, schwer von Art,
ist sie für Liebe sehr empfänglich;
und hat sie einmal sich gepaart
bleibt ihre Neigung unvergänglich.

We may conclude that the poem "Ich bin Dein Weib," first of all, is a personal document of one woman's pained perseverance and strength. It also serves to draw attention to generations of wives who similarly suffered and persevered. Over and above, it is comment on ethical norms and related social practices. In its ambivalence, this poetically and autobiographically disguised social-historical comment allows and invites the reader to form his or her own judgment. Thanks to its simple language—cast in pleasantly flowing unrhymed lines of irregular length and intensified only through repetition and concluding laconic summation—and thanks to its thought-provoking implication, this poem remains eminently readable even to the reader today.

Entirely different in tone and message are Seel's numerous poems celebrating the joy and exuberance of physical love. The poetic quality of these pieces varies greatly. The explicitness found in some, coupled with occasional clichés, are not likely to stand the test of universal taste. However, some of these poems are cast in folksong-like simplicity and lightness. Their charming naiveté of tone and imagery serves well to create some very attractive "Liebeslieder."⁷ "Das Feuer" is one such "song":

Und wenn Du nicht ein Feuerlein
mir liebevoll gegeben,
so wär ich wohl ein Kieselstein
geblieben für mein Leben.

Nun brennen meine Wangen,
es brennen Aug und Mund,
sie brennen vor Verlangen
nach einer Liebesstund.

Und wenn wir sind beisammen,
mein Feuer brennt so froh,
dann gehst Du auf in Flammen
und brennst auch lichterloh! (AW 39)

These happy sounds, however, do not drown out sobering notes that give expression to an awareness of the fragile nature of love, no matter how eagerly embraced. Under the deceptive title "Einssein" (UM 3/6/1; AW 44: "Wenn Deine Augen . . .") the young poet (in 1924) remembers many occasions where either partner, through silence or sleeping, refused access to her or his innermost self when it was sought by the other. This is her conclusion:

Da hab ich wohl empfunden
wie selten sich das Einssein zeigt,
daß nur in tief erfüllten Stunden
sich eine Seele zu der andern neigt. (St. 3)

The wedge of apartness in spite of shared physical love is, of course, driven deeper and deeper through differences in convictions held and ideals aspired to. Seel has rendered a variety of responses to this ever-recurring human problem. The poem "Worte" (AW 48), for example, gives voice to a naive but surely understandable hope that hugging and kissing might help to bridge over the gulf created by "words":

Wie kann ich denn in Lieb entflammen
wenn Deine Worte mich verdammen? (St. 1)

(. . .)

Sieh doch, Du löschst die Spur,
Du tötest die Natur,
denn Worte tun nicht gut. (St. 4)

In jeder Nacht mein Mund,
der machet Dich gesund:
er herzt und scherzt und küßt -
kein Wort vonnöten ist. (St. 5)

Whether or not these lines spring from personal experience,⁸ as a poetic text they render, and submit to the reader's judgment, explanations and hopes which people will resort to in an attempt to save a sinking ship. Using a different image, the poem "Der Himmel war . . ." (AW 44) describes graphically what actually happens in such a situation, and what its end result inevitably is:

Der Himmel war ein blaues Meer,
die Erde war ein grünes Feld:
o Herz, wir liebten uns so sehr
und einer war des andern Welt.

Doch als wir flogen zu den Sternen,
kam jeder, ach, zum andern Stern.
Ich glaube, daß wir uns entfernen,
und einer hat den andern nur noch gern.

Lovers, who once thought they were each other's "world," find themselves living on different planets and will, at best, continue to like each other. In a less romantic vein,

the poem "Wie schnell vertauscht" (UM 3/5/2) expresses plain disappointment, even a measure of disgust:

Wie schnell vertauscht [*sic*]
Du die Gedanken,
geh bis vors Haus;
sieh doch, ich führe
Dich noch hinaus. (St. 1)

Und durch den Tunnel
der Gufühle
ziehst Du im Narrenreigen
und alle meine Kühle
wird höfliches Verneigen. (St. 2)

Logically, Seel has written a good number of poems dealing with leave-taking and separation. The dominant tone is one of composed acceptance, probably informed by the experience and knowledge that love will come again. The poem "Abschied" (UM 13) will serve to illustrate:

Gehe zur Türe,
geh bis vors Haus;
sieh doch, ich führe
Dich noch hinaus. (St. 1)

Hände noch pressen,
Mund ist schon stumm,
bald wirst Du vergessen –
sieh Dich nicht um. (St. 2)

(. . .)

Jahre verschwanden
in Wollust und Schlaf;
Liebe wir fanden
als ich Dich traf. (St. 5)

Herz war die Scheuer,
Ernte so schwer;
und wieder neuer
kommt Liebe daher. (St. 6)

What with the "heavy harvest" of a disappointed love receding into the past, Love will return, new and refreshed. This has nothing to do with the cynical humour of Marlene

Dietrich's song, "Wer wird denn weinen, wenn man auseinandergeht, wenn an der nächsten Ecke schon ein anderer steht . . .," which Seel cites in the autobiographical poem "Pionierin" (UM 1/7/6) as part of her comments on the disintegration of values after the First World War. It is, rather, a level-headed statement of the fact that human beings, in their rightful pursuit of happiness and meaning, will lose one love and embrace another. It is important to realize, however, that this statement does not negate the value of marital loyalty, which the poems "Ich bin Dein Weib" and "Die Schnecke" so strongly affirm. Significantly, the speaker in the poem "Freudlose Witwe" (UM 13; also titled "Unselges Jahr" AW 56), at the end of her crushing first year of widowhood, prays for "days" and "nights" of "pleasure," and draws hope and reassurance from the renewal she observes in the natural scene around her. First her emotional death:

Unselges Jahr! Langsam schlichst Du zuende,
verzehrtest feurgleich mir Fleisch und Blut. (1,1-2)
(. . .)

. . . Mir schmolzen
Lust und Liebe in der Gedanken Höllenglut.
Mich wärmen keine Worte mehr -
freudlose Witwe, freudlose Tage. (2,9-12)

Then her prayer:

. . . Schenk Tage mir und Nächte,
sieh mich doch freundlich an, Geschick,
denn Leben ohne Lust verbracht ist nichts,
ist nichts als trockner Sand am Ufer. (3,3-6)

Finally her confidence that a new beginning is at hand:

Krokus sticht farbenfroh aus diesem Rasen;
Narzissen wiegen hin und her.
Magnolien öffnen große Tulpenkelche
und spenden neue Götterkraft.
Nichts ist zu Ende. Alles erhebt sich wieder.
Leben ist Ebbe und Flut.
Ich höre eine Stimme und alles ist gut. (St. 4)

Life in nature proceeds in regular cycles (seasons) and constant alternation (tides) — and so does human life. The "Götterkraft" (4,4) emanating from the harbingers of spring will re-awaken both nature and wo/man: "Alles erhebt sich wieder" (4,5). The fact that the "freudlose Witwe" now hears a "voice" (4,7) indicates that she is ready to re-enter the arena of human relationships—which is why to her "all is well" (4,7)

again. The tide-metaphor (4,6), of course, is there to signal to the reader that all will not be well forever.

The poems discussed in the preceding pages call to mind some long established poetic traditions. First, the notion of love as being inherently infused with pain, which goes back to the very beginning of recorded German love poetry—to the *Minnesang* of the early thirteenth century and its precursors collected under the title *Minnesang's Frühling*. It is a curious fact that in the cradle of German poetry we find "Frauenklagen"—poems featuring a woman complaining and grieving over the absence or loss of her beloved man. And even though the *Minnesang* proper is characterized by a purely male perspective, its thematic concerns revolve around the essential link between "liebe" and "leit" and the sweetness of suffering that stems from loyal service and intrepid steadfastness in the face of love withheld. Centuries have gone by and brought profound changes in ethos and attendant poetic sensibility and social practice, yet Seel's poem "Ich bin Dein Weib" signals to us that the "virtues" touted then are still in circulation today, be it under the umbrella of affirmation or that of criticism. In this latter regard, true to modern sensibility, Seel's text remains provocatively ambivalent.

Secondly, her poems dealing with the death of love, gradual or otherwise, pick up a thematic thread spun since the time of the German Baroque: the idea of the transience of all things. Nothing will last, and even the sincerest of love may fall victim to the ravishes of time and the changes it brings. Seel, a citizen of the mid-twentieth century, clearly dissociates herself from any romantic notion of "true" love by definition lasting forever—a notion which for sound social reasons has been upheld by religious institutions and state government, and which many would dearly like to see remaining in force. Acknowledging the mutability of even love, Seel does not hold up the banner of erotic pluralism; she is simply taking stock of reality.

Thirdly, the reverse side of the time-honoured notion of transience has been the twin concept of *carpe-diem*: the call to enjoy to the full what good things the day may offer before the day is over and the good things are gone. Surely, this idea has not lost, and will never lose, its validity. Seen in its light, Seel's poems dwelling on the joy and excitement of physical love, take on a deeper meaning and wider significance.

Finally, as indicated in the relevant discussion above, Seel's poems proceeding beyond love lost to love newly found, have as their philosophical ally the notion of "recurrence" coined by Nietzsche ("ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen"). Well before him, Goethe had spoken of "constancy within change" ("Dauer im Wechsel"), interpreting for future generations the age-old idea of constant change. Whether in the guise of constant change, or constancy within change, or recurrence of the same, this idea provides an important depth dimension to Seel's love poetry. It warns us to think twice before dismissing these poems as unreflected paeans to uncontrolled eroticism.

These comments are in no way intended to establish any direct links of borrowing or influence. They are to call attention to the fact that Else Seel's love poetry touches on, and is informed by, ideas that have exercised the minds of philosophers and poets throughout history. As an educated woman, she surely knew about the traditions

referred to. It is, however, important to realize that the connections are inherently embedded in the universality of her topic, love—the force that gives and sustains life. Reflecting on her own observations and experiences of this universal force as honestly and sensitively as she recorded her observations and experiences of pioneer life, she wrote poems that offer authentic samples of human life-experience which philosophical and poetic discourse have endeavoured to probe. Of course, writing about love in the twentieth century requires courage—a quality which Else Seel possessed in abundance. Her isolation from literary and critical trends may have helped her to focus on a subject-matter of her own choosing without regard to any current ideas of what is, or is not, appropriate. In her “Haus im Urwald,” where “Menschlichkeit” had remained intact, she obeyed her own pure creative impulse and, as a result, wrote love poems in which we do indeed find “gems of human significance.”

It has yet to be determined—in greater detail than this first examination of some of her love poems could do—whether these gems are presented to us in “well-wrought urns” (to borrow the New Critic’s pertinent metaphor). Such determination, of course, is a difficult task. In the absence of any normative consensus, and of any will to have one, the “quality” of a given text can only be gauged by a careful analysis of the manner in which its expressive means do, or do not, serve as effective vehicles for the experiences or observations they are to convey. By the evidence of her manuscripts, Else Seel took great care to fashion and fine-tune her verbal structures. A thorough examination of the variety of poetic forms and devices she employed might prove to be an interesting and worthwhile undertaking.

University of Victoria
Victoria, British Columbia

Notes

¹ “Die Unken” is the title of a lengthy poem in which the speaker, a young adult female, lashes out against “Unke Nora” and “Unke Nana,” two yellow-eyed, contemptible old “toads” whose oppressive grip the young woman cannot escape, in spite of her desperate desire, and hopeless effort, to do so. This text (UM 13) is a literal “poetic” version of an earlier prose text (UM 12), broken up into unrhymed verses, with only a few minor simplifications and changes of syntax and vocabulary.

² In his German introduction to Seel’s *Ausgewählte Werke*, Symington provides more detail: “Leider ging das Verhältnis nicht gut aus und wurde für Else Seel ein Erlebnis, aus dem sie pessimistische Konsequenzen zog . . . Ihre Erfahrungen wurden dann die unmittelbare Ursache für ihre Auswanderung nach Kanada” (AW 11).

³ The poem “An ein Ungeborenes” (UM 13), complete with the corrections administered, is telling evidence. Just how deeply Else Lübecke-Seel was affected by this traumatic experience may be gauged by the fact that when her son Rupert Seel was born, she immediately saw the other child and thought of the other father (“Geheimnisvolles Band” AW 38).

⁴ The poem “Letzter Pionier” (UM 13) tells his story.

⁵ A similar strategy has been employed in the poem “Geheimnisvolles Band” (AW 38), where “der Mann” and “das Weib” are used to transcend the very private range of the experience rendered.

⁶ For further comment on this “transfer picture” see Symington, 1984, 19-20.

⁷ There is a group of nine love poems that have been gathered under the title “Liebeslieder” (UM 13). Seven of these are found in Symington’s *Ausgewählte Werke*: “Wenn Deine Augen . . .” (44), “Das Feuer” (39), “Eine weiß und rote Blume” (42), “Nur einen kleinen Tag” (42), “Ich tauche auf” (43), “Es singt und

klings . . ." (43), "Der Himmel war . . ." (44). Three have been set to music: "Die liebe Frau mein" (UM 3/8/4, 6-8), "Eine weiß und rote Blume" (UM 3/8/5), and "Nur einen kleinen Tag" (UM 3/8/10-11).

⁸There is a date and name attached to the unpublished first version of this text: "Am 6. Oktober 1954 (K. W. Maurer)" (UM 3/6/1).

Works Cited

- Neering, Rosemary. 2000. *Wild West Women: Travellers, Adventurers and Rebels*. Vancouver and Toronto: Whitecap Books.
- Seel, Else. "Poems." In Symington, *Ausgewählte Werke [AW]*.
_____. Unpublished Manuscripts. University of Victoria Archives and Special Collections. Else Lübcke Seel. Accession No. 78-1 [UM box/file].
- Symington, Rodney, ed. 1979. *Else Seel: Ausgewählte Werke; Lyrik und Prosa [AW]*. Toronto: German-Canadian Historical Society.
- _____. 1984. "Else Seel: Survival, Assimilation, and Alienation." In *The Old World and the New: Literary Perspectives of German-Speaking Canadians*, Walter Riedel, ed. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 14-36.
- _____. 1986. "Eine deutsch-amerikanische literarische Freundschaft: Else Seel und Ezra Pound." *Yearbook of German-American Studies* 21: 13-38.
- _____. 1989. "Five Years I Wrote to You . . .": An Unknown Correspondent of Ezra Pound." *Paideuma: A Journal Devoted to Ezra Pound Scholarship* 18,1: 162-83.