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From Babylon to Jasper: Recent German-American Literature

Christian Essellen's Babylon.
Edited and with an introduction by Cora Lee Nollendorfs. German Life and Civilization, vol. 19. New York [etc.]: Peter Lang. 1996. xxxviii + 184 pages. $45.95.

Die Zunge als Lohn: Gedichte 1991-1995.
By Richard Exner. Stuttgart: Radius, 1996. 91 pages. DM 29.

The Sunday before Thanksgiving: Two Prose Memoirs.
By Norbert Krapf. Chicago: Rain Crow, 1998. Unpaginated. $5.00.

Kälbchen-Geschichten.
By Lisa Kahn. Frankfurt am Main: Edition Fischer im R. G. Fischer Verlag. 1997. 61 pages, illustrated. DM 12.80.

Semiotische Übungen: Erzählungen / Exercises in Semiotics: Short Stories.
By Rita Terras. New German-American Studies / Neue deutsch-amerikanische Studien, 15. New York [etc.]: Peter Lang. 1998. 147 pages. $39.95.

The works under discussion here fall into three categories: First, Nollendorfs's exemplary edition of a nineteenth-century work long considered lost; second, new works by two established and unquestionably significant German-American authors, Kahn and Terras; and third, two works that not everyone would agree qualify as German-American literature, a new collection of poems by Exner and Krapf's "memoirs." As my comments below should make clear, in my opinion thematic considerations demand the inclusion of Krapf's English-language works; if they are not legitimate—and important—examples of German-Americana, nothing is. Exner, however, is more problematic. The German-American experience was never a significant theme in his poetry, and now a new argument has been added to the arsenal of those who would exclude him from the field of German-Americana: he has retired

from his position as professor of German at the University of California-Santa Barbara and returned to Germany. As the subtitle indicates, these poems were written between 1991 and 1995. Since he moved to Germany in 1992, it can safely be assumed that relatively few of them were written prior to his return. Should this be the last of his volumes to be reviewed in these pages? Let the debate begin.

Turning first to **Cora Lee Nollendorfs** (a faculty member of the German Department of the University of Wisconsin in Madison) and her edition of Essellen's dramatic poem, we learn in the introduction that surprisingly little is known about the author. He was active in revolutionary circles in 1848-49, and was acquainted with Marx and Engels and other prominent figures of his day. Later, important German-Americans like H. A. Rattermann would comment on his significance. But we cannot say with certainty where or when he was born, and where he is buried. After years of painstaking research, Nollendorfs must frequently resort to phrases like "it seems likely" and "it is probable" in her superb introduction.

We do know that Essellen wrote the monumental, and still important, *Geschichte der süddeutschen Mai-Revolution des Jahres 1849* (1849); that he came to America, "probably" in 1852; and that he lived a troubled life here (as he had in Europe), constantly struggling for financial security and apparently an alcoholic; a contemporary reports that his "last days [in May, 1859] were spent in an asylum for inebriates" (xvii). Most significantly for our purposes, he founded and for several years edited *Atlantis*, an irregularly appearing "Zeitschrift [later—Monatsschrift] für Wissenschaft, Politik und Poesie" (xx). Nollendorfs discovered an incomplete run of the early issues in the archives of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin; at one time these issues had been considered lost. Here she found *Babylon*, which had appeared in the journal in installments. There was no consistent pattern to the publication of the segments, and given the episodic (one is tempted to say "expressionistic") nature of the structure of the work, it is possible that as many as three installments may be missing.

Babylon can perhaps best be described as phantasmagoric. The title suggests ancient grandeur and linguistic explosion, and they, along with countless other elements, are indeed present. We find, in addition, mythology, medieval Europe, and the revolutions of 1848-49, as well as numerous allusions to various literary works, including several sustained parodies of scenes from Goethe's *Faust*.

The style is no less eclectic than the subject matter. Iambic pentameter, with and without rhyme, is the predominant linguistic form. This verse is in general reminiscent of Schiller, as long speeches alternate with rapid-paced dialogue, including, on occasion, classical stichomythia. Schiller's favorite themes, e.g., *Vertrauen* and *Verrat*, are not lacking. Other verse forms are also present, and they are used parodistically. Philo's parody of Faust's *Studierzimmer* monologue is in blank verse, as is an exchange between two lowly members of the common people, which in Schiller or Shakespeare would have

been in prose. Alcibiades, on the other hand, speaks in *Knittelvers*. Numerous other forms of language appear: epic (non-dramatic) poetry, lyrical stanzas, and there is even a prose description of a battle scene. To give but one example of the innovative subversion of expectations: in the *Studierzimmer* scene, as Philo nears the conclusion of his classical monologue, he, like Faust, hears a melody: "Doch horch! Welch seltner Klang dringt an mein Ohr?" And what is the message of the song? "'Das Geheimniß, stets glücklich zu leben, / Liegt verborgen im Safte der Reben'" (91).

Nollendorfs has made an important discovery and now offers us a painstakingly edited version of a fascinating literary work. Everyone interested in German-American literature or the presence of the forty-eighters in German-American cultural life owes her a debt of gratitude.

Of **Lisa Kahn**, professor emerita of German (Texas Southern), it can truly be said that she needs no introduction to readers of the *Yearbook*. The author of numerous belletristic works as well as scholarly studies of German-American (as well as continental) literature, she has now turned her considerable talents to children's literature. These *Kälbchen-Geschichten*, we are told, were originally written for her grandchildren. We should all have grandmothers like this!

Each of these six stories is a fairy tale with a title beginning "Vom Kälbchen . . . . " The first, "Vom Kälbchen, das über den Mond springen wollte," begins realistically, with the birth of the calf Romelino under a full moon. Soon Romelino is revealed to be a curious child: "was ist der Mond," he asks (10). His curiosity is first addressed by his mother, who tells him it is made of green cheese, and then by his aunt Helena, who says this is nonsense, and sings a nursery rhyme about the cow jumping over the moon. When Romelino tells his mother that he would like to jump over the moon, it is his mother's turn to tell him this is nonsense: cows just can't do such things. The moon then appears to the calf in a dream, and informs his young friend that he will return in a year, and perhaps then Romelino will have the opportunity to jump over him. The calf spends the year being good, eating his vegetables so that he will develop strong legs. As promised, the moon does return—but not in a dream! The moon settles down in the grass, speaks words of encouragement, and Romelino fulfills his ambition, cleanly jumping over the moon. His feat is celebrated by the entire herd, as well as by the animals of the forest.

The second story begins with a young boy, Julian, naming a new calf. The boy suggests the name Aaron, and after the significance of the name is debated, among the cows and among the humans, it is accepted. But there is a problem: Aaron, who is beautiful golden brown in color, wants to become a truly golden calf, like the one in the story of the Biblical Aaron. Eventually he settles on merely being golden brown, is entered in a show, and wins first prize. He, like Romelino in the first story, has a memory that will last a lifetime. As in the first story (e.g., eating your vegetables), didactic elements are unobtrusively smuggled in: Julian cheerfully postpones his play until his chores are done.

The cheerful mood is shattered in the next story, "Vom Kälbchen, das einen Wolf liebte." A calf is warned by her mother about wolves, who love nothing better than eating "zarte Kälbchen wie du." The calf is duly impressed, "In die große Angst war aber, wie das auch bei den Menschen ist, ein Quentchen Neugier gemischt" (30). This (admittedly adult) reader was totally taken aback by the turn the story then took. The calf ignores her mother's advice, meets a wolf, and the two become fast friends. Hunting season arrives, and the calf's mother explains "diesen grausamen 'Sport' der Menschen" (34), adding that sometimes cows are mistaken for game and accidentally shot. In the end it is not the calf that is shot, but her friend the wolf, and the calf dies of a broken heart. Two morals are clearly expressed: hunting is evil, and if people became vegetarians they would be better off. I find it difficult to avoid a third moral: children can ignore parents' (alas, legitimate) warnings about danger with impunity.

The fourth and sixth tales are similar to the first and second, as calves achieve their impossible dreams, and the fifth repeats the third, but with a happy ending: a calf befriends and tames a fire-breathing dragon. Each of the tales is accompanied by one or more illustrations, some photographs of children on a farm, some whimsical drawings.

Of course the manner of telling is of considerably greater importance than what is told, so let's turn to Kahn's style, which is downright seductive. A few random examples will have to suffice. The cows speak a thoroughly delightful German, highlighted at appropriate places by a "mu, mu" (for calves) or more mature "muh, muh" (for cows)--or on occasion a "muh, muh, muh" for emphasis. Phrases are repeated with minor variations, as is appropriate for a fairy tale; for example, "von Mutter, Vater, Brüdern, Schwestern, Tanten, Onkeln, Kusinen und Vettern ersten, zweiten und dritten Grades" appears near the beginning (9), and again, with modifications, at other places later in the story. Charming songs appear throughout the story, a very effective device in literature like this. Finally, the names of the animals are wonderful. The father of the clan is Darwin, and among his progeny are—names all supplied by Julian, Name-Giver in Chief—Antigone, Apollo, Big Mac, and Elvis Presley.

If my grandchildren knew German, how much fun it would be to read these stories to them. And I would love to hear Lisa Kahn read them.

Rita Terras, like Exner and Kahn, is a retired professor of German (Connecticut College), and like them will be familiar to connoisseurs of German-American literature. Although she has published less, she is the author of two collections of poetry and has established a reputation as an editor, most recently of *TRANS-LIT*, the journal of the Society for Contemporary American Literature in German. Do not let yourself be put off by the title *Semiotische Übungen*: these stories are anything but the postmodern exercises in intellectual one-upmanship we might be led to expect. On the contrary, they are richly nuanced portrayals of characters in richly varied situations. The appeal is

increased by the presence of German and English versions of each of the eleven stories: as the author explains in her brief preface, some were first written in English and then "transposed" (a word that is more apt than "translated") into German, and vice versa.

The first story, "Signs" / "Zeichen," does indeed set a semiotic tone. It opens with the question "Actually it is all about signs and their interpretation, isn't it?" directed by a woman driving a car to her husband, who is a passenger. He has no idea she is thinking that the traffic sign she just noticed, "Speed Zone," might with equal logic mean "Zone where speeding is permitted," or, for that matter, "an area where those, so inclined, could indulge in taking amphetamines generally known as speed" (1). His response is noncommittal, and what follows is a model of the "slice-of-life" short story, with no more of a conclusion than it had beginning. The German version begins with the same English question. Here the husband's response is quite specific, if no less responsive to her concerns: "Wieso plötzlich auf Englisch?" (5). This illustrates, or anticipates, two important aspects of the collection: language is an important motif, and as the preface notes, there are often differences of some significance between the two versions.

Beginning with the radically different titles, "The Double" / "Prochaska," the second story has virtually nothing in common with the first. It is a detective story. A woman, fiftyish, living alone, discovers a corpse—as it turns out, a murder victim—while walking along a beach. Of course, we, like the police and the woman who found the body, want to know who done it. But the woman is struck by the fact that the victim's clothes resemble her own, and she becomes riveted on pursuing the identity of the deceased, who, it turns out, is also a woman, fiftyish, living alone, and a childhood immigrant from Europe, among other parallels. (In this case there is a conclusion, which I will not spoil for the reader.)

In the next eight stories, the German version comes first, probably an indication that it was the original. Whereas I could not say which of the two I prefer in the first two pairs, in many of those that follow I have a rather strong preference for the German. A detailed comparison of any of the pairs would be an interesting exercise, but here I will give only one example of the reason for my preference: the rather frequent use of "one" when "man" is used in the German. "One" impresses me as being rather stilted, and appropriate only in formal contexts, a category into which by no means all of these stories fit. A significant exception to this general preference can be found in "Tote essen keine Oliven" / "Olives, Pineapple and Gummibears," where the tragic theme contrasts most effectively with the whimsical English title, as well as with individual passages, such as the following: "Most of the other marriages whose making I witnessed are also still o.k. except the Canadian one with the oily champagne. That one did not last. Never serve oily champagne at a wedding" (111)—much more appealing than the original, which itself is effective in its own

way: "Kein gutes Omen für eine gute Ehe. Auf einer Hochzeit sollte man Ananas und vielleicht ein paar Oliven anbieten" (107).

Several themes and styles are reflected in these eight stories, most of which are set in America. The protagonists range from a young German child visiting New York who is impressed by a Kandinsky painting in the Guggenheim museum, to the ninety-one-year-old Kanzleisekretär Emmerich von Werther, who in 1837 thinks back to his youth, his friends Lotte, Albert, et al., and the novel Goethe created out of his experiences. Most of them, however, are somewhat similar to the first: a slice-of-life situation in which a sense of alienation takes precedence over communication. Immigrants with their lack of fluency in English appear with some degree of frequency.

The final (and the longest) story, "De Senectute: A Chronological Account"/"De Senectute: Ein chronologischer Bericht," echoes many of the themes of the collection, from the trivial (e.g., eating pizza) to the very serious: human relationships, and verbal and nonverbal communication in all their subtle richness. Two primary threads around the protagonist, an intellectual middle-aged woman, are masterfully interwoven: the essay she is writing on aging, and the emotional relationship she slowly develops with a somewhat younger man, an architect who is designing a new house on the Massachusetts coast for her and her family. This story, in English or German, belongs in any collection of "The Best Short Stories of 1998."

Richard Exner is widely recognized as one of the outstanding poets writing in German today. His work is modern, but in no way postmodern. The poems, which are divided into cycles ranging in length from one (the initial poem) to nine, are invariably written in an accomplished free verse. The prose poems, several of which are interspersed, are of equally high quality. His voice is personal, and his themes are timeless: nature, art, mortality, time in other contexts, speech and silence; as was noted above, only rarely does a specifically American setting appear. The personal element is especially strong in this collection, most significantly in the cycle "Hoffnung, vor-operativ," occasioned by a major operation, fortunately a successful one.

The lines from which the title are taken, from the poem "Lebenslauf, mythisch," will illustrate how these themes are interwoven: "Der Fährmann / holt über und / nimmt sich die / Zunge als / Lohn" (9), as the tongue itself replaces the mythological coin left under the tongue. A strong spiritual thread runs through the collection, and here, too, language is important, as, for example, in the motto to the poem "Schwere Zunge": "Wer hat den Menschen / den Mund geschaffen? / 2. Mose 4, 11," and in the concluding lines to this, one of the more interesting poems in the collection: ". . . Vielleicht flösse / Das Licht fließender, / wenn wir stockender / sprächen" (46-47).

German-American or not, Exner is an outstanding poet. We can be proud to have been able to claim him as one of us for forty years.

Norbert Krapf, professor of English at Long Island University, is well known as a poet, translator, and editor. The two texts of *The Sunday before Thanksgiving* seem to be directly autobiographical, and from the perspective of the author they are indeed "memoirs." I, however, would prefer to call them prose poems. Both in language and in structure they are unambiguously literary. Each consists of ten numbered sections consisting of a single paragraph, ranging in length from seven to twenty lines. Each tells of a death and the reaction of the first-person narrator to this death, and in each the heritage of the deceased German-American is central. The structures, too, are superficially similar, beginning *in medias res* and ending with the reactions of the protagonists, with flashbacks, which include the actual death, in between. Finally, spiritual values figure prominently in both pieces. In subtle ways, however, they are quite different.

In the first section of "On a Hill Near the Rhine," a man with a German name watches "a boy dressed in a Western Union uniform walking up the hill" toward his house. It is March, 1945. We know, of course, that the messenger is bringing the telegram informing the family of the death of a loved one, presumably a son. And the date immediately suggests the mood of *All Quiet on the Western Front*: why now?—the war is almost over. Before the telegram is actually delivered, we learn about the son. He always wanted to be a priest, and would have been the first in his family. He enters the seminary, but the religious order does not consider him ready and dismisses him ("'Maybe you can come back in a couple of years,' the abbot tells the young man"). The man is then drafted. His death on a German hill as the war draws to an end is described. A soldier who was with him will write to inform the family that one of their son's last acts was to kneel for a brief prayer. The narrator, much later, searches out the hill where his uncle died, an uncle he never knew. "Here, on this obscure piece of solid earth, which an army letter referred to as a clichéd 'hallowed ground,' I am surrounded by weeds whose names I know neither in my own language nor the tongue of my ancestors."

There are similarities and differences between the two. The second, title story is less intense, although in this case the death of the narrator's father is the subject. Here the man has reached old age and death is not unexpected. Like his predecessor in the first text, he was a religious man: "Sometimes, toward the end, we would find him sitting alone in a room, moving his lips in silence. There was always a rosary in his pocket." The German-American element, on the other hand, is different. Both in flashbacks to the father's younger years and in the language of the mourners ("You haff my Zim-pah-tee") the importance of his German heritage, and its continuing presence in Jasper, Indiana, is kept before us.

As the quotes given above indicate, these texts are not lacking in sentimentality. But the sentimentality is no less effective than it is appropriate. The mood oscillates, as the language takes its turns, from the deathly objectivity of the telegram's capitalized message to the most subjective expressions and

descriptions of loss and grief. Either of these texts would be effective additions to an English-language course in German-American Studies.

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