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### Charles Sealsfield's "Fable of the Republic"

In the "Vorrede" to his first published work, *Die Vereinigten Staaten von Nordamerika, nach ihrem politischen, religiösen und gesellschaftlichen Verhältnisse betrachtet* (1827), Sealsfield invoked a recent public symbol: the fiftieth anniversary of the American Declaration of Independence. The Jubilee of 1826 was a time of unbridled rejoicing, and Sealsfield leaves no doubt in the reader's mind as to the significance of this event. In true Jeffersonian fashion he declares it to mark "Die Feier des Sieges der Menschheit über Tyrannei, Aberglaube und Vorurtheil."<sup>1</sup> In the English version of the above-mentioned work, published in the same year, he enunciates the symbolic importance of this occasion even more clearly:

Fifty years have passed since the emancipation of the United States. This lapse of time has solved two great questions. It has exposed the fallacy of human calculations, which anticipated only present anarchy and ultimate dissolution for the new Republic, and it has established the possibility of a people governing themselves, and being prosperous and happy.<sup>2</sup>

Sealsfield was fortunate to witness this celebration. As someone eager to be initiated into the spirit of the new nation, he could actually experience the process of mythmaking at first hand. For after fifty years of national existence, the American people, Sealsfield observed, seemed to have reached that stage in their development, where they were intent on sanctifying their past, rendering immortal through public ritual, as one historian has described it, "the fable of the republic."<sup>3</sup>

The "fable of the republic" became Sealsfield's primary theme and obsession as well. In the same "Vorrede" he conjures up another symbol which belongs to this republican legacy. It is a hallowed custom, Sealsfield writes, for the President of the United States to go on horseback to the Capitol, tie his horse on one of its posts, and then after "a five hour conference," untie his horse and return home. This

apparent lack of pomp and ceremony on the part of a public leader is, in fact, another ritual which reveals the republican purity of the young commonwealth.<sup>4</sup> It is, however, amid this process of ritualizing that a certain disquietude emerges in Sealsfield's writing—a disquietude which has obsessed the republican tradition in general:

So ist noch immer das republikanische Verhältnis in den Vereinigten Staaten und so ist es in diesen Blättern dargestellt. Möchte es stets so bleiben!<sup>5</sup>

Sealsfield's paean to republicanism is, in fact, coupled with intimations of loss.

Sealsfield celebrates in his first book America's coming of age. Like many devotees of the republican tradition, he could point to all the skeptics who questioned America's ability to survive and assert that America had joined the family of established and powerful nations. The reasons for America's success were easy to fathom:

A sea-coast of three thousand miles, excellent harbours, important rivers, rising and emptying themselves into its territory, a rich virgin soil, a temperate climate, a population composed of the descendants of the first nation in the world, the sciences of the ancient, the experience of modern times transplanted into a new and susceptible soil, and both united to the most liberal constitution that ever existed, were certainly elements, which well-employed and well-directed, afforded reasons to anticipate future greatness.<sup>6</sup>

But apart from these very palpable reasons to explain America's rise, Sealsfield found another, even more important reason which was rooted in the mythic legacy of the young nation. The Washington cult is eagerly embraced by Sealsfield to account for America's coming of age:

The Union happily found a genius fully competent to give it this direction in—[sic] Washington. Ever the same at home, in the field and in the cabinet, he imperceptibly gave to the nation the impress of his character and his politics. A character more firm, more composed, and notwithstanding its simplicity, more dignified, than this statesman's can scarcely be imagined. There never existed a man who knew the true interest of his country better than Washington, or sought it in a simpler or wiser way.<sup>7</sup>

Like many Americans involved in mythmaking in the 1820s, Sealsfield found the core of Washington's legacy in the Farewell Address. Sealsfield accepted the basic precepts of republican philosophy. If America followed "the sacred trust" and remained true to the ideals of the Republic, then its "unparalleled prosperity" would be guaranteed. If, however, it deviated from Washington's "maxims," then its survival as a nation was at stake.<sup>8</sup> The ambivalent nature of the republican vision is clearly defined. Progress is inevitable and desirable, but it is also carefully controlled, only made possible by scrupulously adhering to a sanctified tradition.



Underlying this belief in the fragility of republics was an elaborate and long-established philosophy of history. Couched in classical theory and further developed by Machiavelli and then the Whig and County Opposition theorists, it became an influential doctrine in the American colonies' opposition to the British Empire. According to this doctrine, the British Empire was wallowing in corruption and vice. Manipulated by a small monied clique, it was attempting to despoil the foundations of the American Republic and replace it with its own insidious tyranny. The American Revolution (and later the American nation) was, thus, defined as a struggle to preserve the ancient liberties of the republican commonwealth and the British Empire. It was restorative and reformative rather than revolutionary.<sup>9</sup>

Sealsfield's early works reveal his attempt to adopt an American point of view. Above all, his continuous preoccupation with the theme of corruption in the republican commonwealth reflects a prevailing attitude in the National Period of perceiving Europe and America in a dichotomous relation—the former being the hotbed of decadence and vice and the latter being the ideal of innocence and promise.<sup>10</sup> The political landscape in 1826 lends itself easily in Sealsfield's opinion to the corruption theory:

Was die gegenwärtig herrschende Parthei (Adams und die Tories) betrifft, so ist sie eine Erscheinung der Zeit, die wieder verschwinden wird. . . . Sie muß, sie wird verschwinden, denn sie ist nicht auf festen Grund gebaut, und die Pflanze eines ausländischen Treibhauses, die in Amerika nicht gedeihen wird, nicht gedeihen kann.<sup>11</sup>

Despite Sealsfield's attempts to impress his European readership that he was an American writing about the New World from an American point of view, he frequently imposes European categories onto the American scene. In his discussion of the American party system, which he adds as a long footnote, he writes,

Die politischen Partheien in den Vereinigten Staaten von Nordamerika sind Demokrats, Federals, Torys.

Demokrats werden geheißen, die jedem Bürger, der das einundzwanzigste Jahr zurückgelegt hat, das Wahlrecht zugestehen, ohne Rücksicht, ob er liegendes Vermögen oder nicht besitze.

Federals, die das Recht zu wählen und gewählt zu werden bloß dem Land- und Eigenthumsbesitzer (Freeholder) zuerkennen.

Torys werden die Anhänger Englands und die monarchistische Parthei überhaupt geheißen.<sup>12</sup>

Of course, in 1827 when *Die Vereinigten Staaten* was published there was no Tory party in the United States. Nor was there a Tory party after the Constitution had been ratified in 1789. There were Tory sympathies, but this was understandable, since the republican experiment was still new and uncertain, and old solutions, even when not entertained seriously, provided a certain amount of comfort. Hence Sealsfield's interpretation of American political parties mirrored more clearly the realities on the



Continent and even in England than in the United States. The struggles between the Monarchists and the Liberals epitomized the political landscape in Central Europe in the *Vormärz*. But when Sealsfield applies this to American politics, his analysis of the 1820s takes on fanciful tones:

We see, in short, the principle of monarchism developing itself in the United States; and though it is not attempted to establish it by means of a revolution which would assuredly fail, there is a design to bring it about by that cunning, cautious, and I may add, American way, which must eventually succeed, unless the spirit of freedom be sufficiently powerful to overrule these subtle preparations.<sup>13</sup>

It is undeniable that Sealsfield acquired an enormous amount of knowledge about the United States in a remarkably short time and believed devoutly in his republican mission. However, he shows at times a curious inability to distinguish between ideological bombast and party conflict. What was already developing in America at this time, as observers like De Tocqueville recognized, was a liberal consensus, with both parties understanding that increased democratization and economic development and opportunity conformed more closely to the needs of their constituencies and their grand design for America.<sup>14</sup>

Sealsfield's first two non-fiction works on America and his subsequent *Austria as It Is* (1828) provide the key to understanding his later fiction. *The United States of North America as They Are* (1827) celebrates his republican vision, and *Austria* embodies his anti-vision—his attack on European absolutism. In other words, Sealsfield attempts to present in his fiction the plausibility and efficacy of his ideas which were already established in his non-fiction works.<sup>15</sup> If in *Der Legitime und die Republikaner* (1833), as one reviewer noted, the legitimacy of the republican ideal is the central concern, in *Morton oder die große Tour* (1835) Sealsfield's republican vision is given a more lucid and more complete expression than in any of his later works.<sup>16</sup> The European readership should realize, along with Morton, that the creation of the republic was a unique event in human history:

Junger Mann! in diesem Wechsel liegt etwas Großes, etwas Erhabenes, etwas, das die Geschichtsblätter der Menschheit nicht zweimal aufweisen können! Es ist dieß der Triumph der amerikanischen Staatsphilosophie, der wahren und einzigen Staatspolitik, ächter amerikanische Staatspolitik, gegen welche die gerühmte Politik der Alten Tyrannei ist. Und das war die Politik eines Franklin, eines J\_\_\_\_n, Ihres Großenkels, ihre Schöpfung dieses prachtvolle Land, durch sie zur Triumphstraße erhoben, auf welcher die Humanität über die in uns inwohnende Selbstsucht den Sieg davon getragen hat.<sup>17</sup>

In fact, *Morton* can be interpreted as an allegory of republican virtue and corruption. On the one hand, there is Colonel Isling who symbolizes the Revolution, the Age of Washington and the Founding Fathers, and the credo of the Republic. On the other hand, there are



Lomund and "der alte Stephy" who represent Sealsfield's oft-vilified *Egoismus* and the emerging plutocracy. The allegorical elements are also embodied in landscapes: "Der Garten Pennsylvaniens" becomes the seat of the republican idyll, while Philadelphia and then London become the centers of corruption and tyranny. In this allegorical pattern, then, Morton symbolizes America—an America caught between its allegiance to its yeoman republican past and the temptations of the new world of commercial capitalism—the world towards which Sealsfield and other exponents of the republican ideal were so ambivalent.<sup>18</sup>

If Sealsfield depicts in his fiction his preoccupation with the threat to republican virtue, in his letters he reveals that he is equally obsessed with this theme. But here he is also concerned with a new threat to American innocence. It is not only the *Weltplutokratie* which is conspiring against the Republic. There were also forces from below—the scores of new immigrants who suddenly became a presence in American life in the 1830s and 1840s. In a letter to Brantz Mayer, a popular author of the time, dated two years after the publication of *Morton*, he writes,

I do not know your opinion about slavery having not read your last work Capt. Conot but such as it appears to me in Virginia I cannot help considering it in many respects as a safety valve warding off the deleterious influence of a too great influx of foreign population & keeping up that staunch republican sense, which distinguished the state of the Washingtons, Patrick Henrys, Jeffersons etc.<sup>19</sup>

The invocation of "keeping up that staunch republican sense, which distinguished the state of the Washingtons, Patrick Henrys, Jeffersons etc." shows that Sealsfield's fiction and his life were suffused by a central theme: the preoccupation with republican virtue. What distinguishes Sealsfield from other advocates of republican thought was his attitude to slavery. His belief that republican virtue was buttressed by the institution of slavery and the exclusion of immigrants clearly differs from the ambivalent spirit of Jeffersonianism and republicanism in general towards these issues.<sup>20</sup>

It is tempting to argue that Sealsfield's political vision exemplifies what Hartz calls the "Reactionary Enlightenment"—the attempt to establish—however chimerical—an alternative to Lockeanism and liberalism in America.<sup>21</sup> But this is to overlook the dual angle of vision which permeates all of Sealsfield's work. On the one hand, there is Sealsfield's American persona who quite plausibly—at least to his contemporaries—presents an American point of view, defining himself in opposition to the Old World. On the other hand, however, this American persona is continually being molded by his European sensibility, which subtly colors Sealsfield's perceptions and gives his American identity its somewhat exaggerated character.<sup>22</sup>

Hence to understand Sealsfield's *Amerikabild*, it is necessary to exhume the European background with which it is continuously interacting. To begin with, Sealsfield's political thought embodied many of the attitudes and values of Central European *Frühliberalismus*. His ideas



were formed by the excesses of Jacobinism on the one hand, as well as by disgust and disappointment over the failure of the Josephinian reform movement on the other hand. Despite his rhetoric, Sealsfield's vision was in many respects quite cautious and conservative. As Thomas Nipperdey writes,

Das Gesellschaftsbild der Liberalen war vorindustriell, nicht auf Wachstum und Dynamik, sondern auf Stabilität und Statik gerichtet, nicht auf Konkurrenz und Konflikt, sondern auf Harmonie unterschiedlicher Kräfte und Interessen. Das Ideal der Liberalen war eine Gesellschaft vieler kleiner Selbständiger, (Grund-) Eigentümer, Handwerker und Bauern, eine annähernd klassenlose Bürgergesellschaft, in der Talent und Leistung wie Herkunft und Erbe zum Ausgleich kamen; man hat mit Recht gesagt (Gall), daß das Ideal der Liberalen nicht die Gesellschaft des industriell-kommerziellen England, sondern die ausgeglichene Gesellschaft der Schweiz war.<sup>23</sup>

This helps to explain, in part, Sealsfield's so-called "quarrel with modernity"—his constant need to admonish against the forces besieging the Republic. For his Central European liberal perspectives were incapable of accommodating the new imperatives of the market economy and the political and economic demands of the dispossessed.<sup>24</sup>

Sealsfield, as is well known, was not very confident of the success of Central European liberalism. In the United States, however, he believed that the central tenets of liberalism had triumphed. It was in the United States of the eighteenth century, where Sealsfield found his political vision realized. The irrevocable breach with absolutism, the creation of a republic with established constitutional safeguards, the presence of a gentry class which was continuously being revitalized by democratic *aristoi*—these were the elements that were invoked by Sealsfield's Central European liberalism. In other words, it was in the Virginia of the Founding Fathers, in Madisonian constitutionalism, and in Jeffersonian agrarianism (and pastoralism) that Sealsfield believed his own utopian longings were given an eternally valid form.<sup>25</sup>

Since Sealsfield's republic was, in part, rooted in eighteenth-century values and concepts, this presented his vision with many difficulties. As Merrill Peterson writes,

Although democratic in many of its effects, the agrarian dogma was inherently conservative. From the beginning the anomaly of American politics was that the democratic tradition was the tradition of landed property.<sup>26</sup>

Jacksonian America, even if it did cling fondly to many of these symbols, was ultimately moving rapidly to destroy the ideal of a gentry republic. Of course, it is understandable how Sealsfield could project his admiration for aristocrats in democratic garb onto the American scene and convince himself that this was a viable synthesis.<sup>27</sup> In Europe the more clearly defined ideological positions would have made such a synthesis impossible. Hartz, in describing the contradictions inherent in agrarian



liberalism, also points to Sealsfield's dilemma: "What it meant, of course, was that the Mr. Hyde of an Edmund Burke was always struggling to explode beneath the Dr. Jekyll of a Thomas Paine."<sup>28</sup>

It is significant that Sealsfield attempted to find a way out of the gentry-republic dilemma. As the East was becoming more and more Europeanized (Colonel Isling was already curiously involved with "dem alten Stephy"), Sealsfield, like Frederick Jackson Turner at the end of the century, discovered in the concept of the frontier the possibility of sustaining his utopian vision. As Sealsfield's narrator in *Ralph Doughby's Esq. Brautfahrt* (1835) explains,

So berühren sich bei uns die Endpunkte sozialer Stellungen, und runden in steter Reibung, in fortwährend wie im Kreisel umherrollender Beweglichkeit ihre wechselseitigen Härten und Ecken ab. Der Senatorsohn baut seine Hütte auf einem Stück Waldlande, das an die Besitzung des Sprößlings eines schottischen Viehtreibers anstößt, das Weib dieses, war vielleicht die Magd der Senatorstochter, die sie nun als Nachbarin begrüßt und ihre kleinen Dienstleistungen mit dankbarfrohem Entgegenkommen annimmt. So befördert bei uns gewissermaßen die Nothwendigkeit jenes republikanische Gleichheitssystem, das im Westen seine Wurzel ausbreitet, tiefer schlägt, während es im Osten, im Gewühle unserer Seestädte, bereits starke Stöße erleidet.<sup>29</sup>

The frontier, in essence, is a force of regeneration, preventing the Republic from succumbing to its hitherto known fate—corruption and decline. On the frontier, the Republic can be extricated from the cycles of history, given a new dimension in the apparently limitless space of the American West. It is interesting that Sealsfield tries to transform his ideal of the republic from a temporal concept to a spatial one. Sealsfield's "republikanisches Gleichheitssystem" can occupy a timeless middle ground, while decay can be staved off in a world no longer governed by the laws of history.<sup>30</sup>

But in this characteristically American metaphor of the frontier, Sealsfield's European sensibility again emerges. The American frontier and the Republic are metamorphosed into a *Biedermeier* idyll. Above all, in his invocation of the *Vaterhaus* symbol, Sealsfield reveals the standard *Biedermeier* "Vorliebe für die kleinen politischen und gesellschaftlichen Formen."<sup>31</sup> When the narrator in *Ralph Doughby's Esq. Brautfahrt* exclaims, "Unsere Häuser in Louisiana sind wahre Republiken, wo Jeder freien Zutritt hat, bei Tage und so ziemlich auch bei Nacht," he suggests that the house has become the focal point of human community and the last refuge of civility and order in a world marked on the one hand by *Egoismus* and on the other hand by forces which are still only dimly comprehended.<sup>32</sup> As Sengle writes, "In der erweiterten Familie liegt die seelisch-geistige Grundlage der Biedermeierkultur."<sup>33</sup> Sealsfield's *Vaterhausrepublik*, apart from its tenacious defense of slavery, could be transplanted quite conveniently to what was seen as the idyllic valleys of the Rhine or the Danube.

The *Leitfigur* in Sealsfield's fiction is "der amerikanische Gentle-



man."<sup>34</sup> This figure fuses the diverse elements of Sealsfield's republican vision into a unified whole. Originally a republican idea at the heart of Jefferson's agrarian gentry polity, it becomes in Sealsfield's work juxtaposed with frontier ideology and *Biedermeier* imagery. Nathan, who could appear in any *Biedermeier* novel as the benevolent patriarch, is at the same time a Boone-like character who, to use Frederick Merk's term, is involved in the process of "state-making"—all of the size of the safe, extended family.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, "the fable of the republic," which at the Jubilee of 1826 has a progressive aura in Sealsfield's work, evolves ten years later into an outcry against the incursions of modernity. The republican vision was beginning to fade. The Jacksonians, whom Sealsfield had initially supported, had opened up the sluice gates of modernization. The forces that were ultimately to destroy the *Vaterhaus* and the Republic and to transform "the American gentleman" into an unscrupulous plutocrat had already been unleashed.<sup>36</sup>

Sealsfield's later letters tend to support this thesis. In these letters he emerges as a republican Cato inveighing against the dangers of corruption:

Der gegenwärtige Moralitätszustand in den V.St. ist ein gräßlicher. Vor mir liegt der Louisville Courier, der dreizehn Morde in den letzten 2 Jahren in dieser Stadt und Grafschaft aufzählt, und kein einziger dieser Mörder wurde auch nur im geringsten bestraft.<sup>37</sup>

It is one of the ironies of Sealsfield's life that while he bemoaned the loss of republican virtue, his investments in railroad stocks contributed to the emergence of monied interests which he and other republican theorists claimed was leading to the demise of the Republic. In this sense he was characteristically Jacksonian.

The Civil War provided the pivotal experience for Sealsfield and other devotees of the republican ideal. The Republic had failed paradoxically because it was successful. Success, according to this line of reasoning, leads to corruption, avarice, and the love of luxury. The independent citizenry would degenerate into a state of dependence and apathy. The result would be a temporary state of anarchy, followed by an insidious form of tyranny. That Sealsfield interpreted the Civil War through the prism of the classical republican ideal becomes manifest in his later letters. In 1861 he writes:

Eine Verschleuderung, eine Betrugerei—Corruption, die über alle Begriffe geht. Unser Volk wird durch eine harte Schule noch zu gehen haben—denn durch ein 80 jähriges Glück, einen 50 jährigen Frieden verdorben, verweichlicht, ist es in einem Grade faul geworden, wie es nur zur Zeit der römischen Republik unter den Sullas und Catilinas gesehen worden.<sup>38</sup>

In another letter written in the same year, Sealsfield writes, "Mein Land muß durch alle die Krisen durchgehen, die größeren Republiken in ihren Krankheiten zur Bedingung gestellt sind."<sup>39</sup>



There were, however, optimistic devotees of the republican ideal in America. In fact, there were those who believed that the drift to tyranny was not the ultimate fate of the American experiment. As John E. Crowley notes, Americans, steeped in classical theory, could come to other conclusions:

Given the lesson that societies changed in fundamentally similar ways, it may be paradoxical that the experience and wisdom of antiquity also suggested that history could be transcended—either through the deliberate restoration of society to an earlier phase of the cycle or even by an escape from history by the engineering of a timeless state in which change did not take place.<sup>40</sup>

The idea of a return to the "sacred trust" enjoyed a wide popularity in America before and during the Civil War. The belief in moral regeneration through a resurrection of republican traditions was thought to be vital if the nation were to survive. Partisan politics, mediocrity, moral laxity, mammon, and, above all, slavery were all offered as explanations for the country's malaise. As Paul C. Nagel writes, "The war was construed as both a sign of God's long-overdue wrath and of divine cleansing."<sup>41</sup> Only an adherence to the republican pantheon could avert the fate normally prescribed for republics.

Sealsfield also regarded the Civil War as a "cleansing" of corruption and vice in the republican commonwealth. However, he differs from many of the American proponents of the republican ideal in his skepticism about a return to republican virtue. While influential contemporaries like Lowell and Emerson were pleading for a recrudescence of democracy, Sealsfield, in a letter written in 1861, proclaimed the demise of democracy in America:

Dann ist es nebst Reinigungsproceß zugleich Übergang zu anderer Staatsform. Bisher war Demokratie die für die V.St. nothwendige Bedingung. Volksherrschaft in ihrer vollsten Ausdehnung. Diese war Bedingung um das Land zu bevölkern. Es ist bevölkert worden, d.h. alle Elemente gute und schlechte—der ganzen Welt haben sich auf die V.St. geworfen, haben da Heimath und Herd gefunden, die sie ohne Volksherrschaft—wenn ein Monarch geherrscht hätte, nie gefunden hätten. Nun ist freilich die transatlantische Welt bevölkert, aber die Elemente dieser Bevölkerung heterogen, verdorben—lasterhaft, verbrecherisch zum Theil—diese Elemente haben zugleich die Crisis heraufbeschworen, eine Crisis, aus der das Land gesunder hervorgehen, aber unter der es auch in Theile zerbrochen (wie die Südamerikanischen Staaten) werden kann. . . . Es ist eine würdiges Studium für die Weisen. Mit der Demokratie hat es im Süden bereits ein Ende. Im Norden wird sie gleichfalls einer anderen Regierungsform weichen müssen. Sie hat übrigens ihre Bestimmung vollkommen erfüllt.<sup>42</sup>

It is interesting that Sealsfield again expresses ideas and themes that were an integral part of American ideology and mythmaking. According to republican doctrine, America could only preserve its institutions amid



an abundance of space, with the presence of a permanent frontier. Long before Frederick Jackson Turner published his famous thesis, Sealsfield suggests in this passage that the frontier no longer exists. The "transatlantic world" is inhabited, settled (*bevölkert*). The apparently limitless supply of free land, which made America unique, is no longer available, and as a result immigrants can no longer be easily absorbed into Sealsfield's idealized yeomanry. Hence the frontier acting as a safety valve, which was supposed to guarantee that republics did not degenerate into chaos and tyranny, could not necessarily be expected to perform its sacred task of preventing America from succumbing to European corruption.<sup>43</sup>

The form of government, which would emerge to supersede democracy after it had "served its purpose" of settling the continent, also preoccupied Sealsfield in his later years. In another letter written in 1861, Sealsfield alludes to the Civil War: "Dieser Bürgerkrieg, der Zwei Principe im Kampfe zeigt . . ." <sup>44</sup> These "two principles" have already been delineated in his fiction and in his early travel books. The first "principle" is embodied in the plutocracy, which he equates with the North. As Sealsfield writes in the above-mentioned letter, the Northern army consisted of the "Gold und Dollar jagenden Yankee."<sup>45</sup> As we know from *George Howard's Esq. Brautfahrt* (1834) and *Die deutsch-amerikanischen Wahlverwandtschaften* (1839-40), the plutocracy had already established itself in the coastal states of the Northeast and, like the "Spinne" in *Morton*, was already planning to undermine the Republic. The only counterweight in Sealsfield's Manichean world view was the Southern patriarchy, which Sealsfield endowed with all the trappings of a *Biedermeier* idyll. That this form of society was doomed became increasingly clear to Sealsfield and explains the profound pessimism at the end of his life.

Perhaps the literary reception of Sealsfield's work when it first appeared illuminates his dilemma most acutely. From the very inception of his literary career, reviewers in Germany recognized that Sealsfield was committed, even obsessed with propagating his republican vision. One reviewer noted that Sealsfield was imbued with "ein etwas republikanisch-pedantisches Air."<sup>46</sup> Another critic remarked that Sealsfield was "ein feuriger Republikaner mit Haut und Haar, der über unser royalistisches und feudalistisches Europa bedauernd die Achseln zuckt."<sup>47</sup> Still one critic, in particular, casts light on the pathos of Sealsfield's life and work:

O könnten wir dem Verf. aus innerster Brust in seinen begeisterten Hoffungen auf die Dauer, auf die Unzerstörbarkeit dieser Institutionen, dieser schönen Früchte eines edlen Republikanism, beistimmen! Aber, aber, ach! sie ermangeln der Realität, diese süßen Träume; und die Schwärmerei eines jugendlich kräftigen Enthusiasm hält den kalten Blick der Reflexion, die Prüfung historischer Kritik nicht aus. Nordamerika muß und wird in der Monarchie untergehen: diese Phase politischer Umgestaltung ist in der Dinge Ordnung, und der erhabene Schwung keiner Idee, kein Gott, wird sie aufhalten. Traurige, eiskalte Wirklichkeit



den Flammen des Ideals gegenüber! Aber es ist so, und muß so seyn, und die Erde, nur noch Planet der Wandlung, gestattet die Fixität nicht, mit welcher sich die Ahnung des Höhern schmeichelt. Die Ausartung der Civilisation selbst, mit ihren unvermeidlichen moralischen und legislativen Folgen, wird die nordamerikanische Revolution herbeiführen; und die energische Hand des Monarchism wird dann wieder zusammenfassen müssen, was die allmählich immer lockerer gewordenen republikanischen Bande auseinander haben fallen lassen. Ein ähnliches Resultat liefert die Geschichte aller Zeiten und Völker; ehe der Sitteneinfalt und der Beschränkung in die engsten Territorialgrenzen nicht Dauer zugesichert werden kann, dürfen auch Republiken auf Dauer rechnen. Dieß hat schon Montesquieu behauptet; und, wie schmerzlich es ist, so etwas aussprechen zu müssen, Nordamerika, gleich der Schweiz, werden früher, oder später, den Beleg zu seiner Behauptung liefern.<sup>48</sup>

Sealsfield's grand preoccupation with the republic is suddenly unravelled as part of a general preoccupation in the *Vormärz* with the ideal political form: Is the republic a viable alternative to monarchy; has the monarchy lost its legitimation; must the contemporary republic conform to the cyclical pattern of the inevitable rise and fall of classical republics? That this critic had obvious monarchist sympathies only reinforces the thesis that Sealsfield was struggling not only to convince the middle classes of Central Europe of the viability of the republican alternative, but to some extent himself, since he and his culture were still not quite certain of the longevity and suitability of republics.<sup>49</sup> Hence the same critic, quoted previously, perhaps provided a literary epitaph which Sealsfield in his later years might have found appropriate, as he observed the Republic of Washington and Jefferson suffering through the cataclysm of the Civil War, seemingly following a timeless pattern which, as its culture believed, had been preordained:

Das, was ewig in Gesang soll leben,  
muß im Leben untergeh'n

und dieß soll hier ganz eigentlich von nordamerikanischer Republik und  
daraus hervorgegangener Lebensform gelten.<sup>50</sup>

Thus, Sealsfield's work is intimately connected with the transatlantic preoccupation with the virtuous republic which, as Pocock shows, has been a significant utopian model in the history of European thought.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, Sealsfield's adherence to the ideal of a virtuous republic, along with his invocation of the "myth of exodus" from a moribund Europe to a regenerate America in a Garden of Plenty, places him within the tradition of the first half of the nineteenth century when the republican ideal was regarded as a real alternative to absolutism in Europe. Further, the *Amerika-Mythos*, which, in fact, idealized immigration, was the most obvious solution to the problems posed by the resurgence of reaction and its attendant conflicts. After mid-century when new utopian models began to displace the virtuous republic and immigration as solutions to the crisis of modernization, Sealsfield's message became less appeal-



ing.<sup>52</sup> In America, however, the myth of a virtuous republic still continued to explain American nationhood and culture, and American writers, from the inception of the Republic onwards, composed jeremiads and anti-jeremiads in homage to this model. Sealsfield's achievement, then, fits somewhat ambiguously into the tradition of the republican jeremiad which still provides a mode of perceiving America and the world up to the present.<sup>53</sup> As Roland Berthoff writes, "Corruption—the sad corruption of republican virtue—has been the lament of Americans from Shays's Rebellion down to Watergate."<sup>54</sup> It is, however, in the work of a former Moravian monk pretending to be an American writer, where this plea for republican virtue temporarily found a popular transatlantic audience. Few writers have depicted these myths so painstakingly in their fiction as Sealsfield, and like many writers who have preached the jeremiad, Sealsfield was compelled to experience the same hope and the same despair.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Charles Sealsfield, *Die Vereinigten Staaten von Nordamerika, nach ihrem politischen, religiösen und gesellschaftlichen Verhältnisse betrachtet* (1827; reprint, Hildesheim, New York: Olms Presse, 1972), iii. *Die Vereinigten Staaten von Nordamerika* was completed in 1826, only three years after Sealsfield had arrived in America, and published by the renowned Johann Friedrich Cotta Verlag. As Arndt writes, Sealsfield regarded his negotiations with Cotta as an important step in fulfilling his political mission. In 1824 he already began a correspondence with Cotta, offering his services as a journalist. In order to establish his reputation in America, he had to achieve success in England, and a useful way of accomplishing this was to have publishing credits in Germany. After signing a contract with Cotta, Sealsfield left in the same year for London and soon reached an agreement with the equally famous publisher John Murray on the publication of his book, which he then used to promote his book in Germany and obtain a badly needed loan from Cotta (see Karl J. R. Arndt's introduction to *Die Vereinigten Staaten*, Olms edition, xviii–xxx).

<sup>2</sup> Charles Sealsfield, *The United States of North America as They Are* (1827; reprint, Hildesheim, New York: Olms Presse, 1972), v. *The United States of North America* and the second volume, *The Americans as They Are* were published in London in 1827. Arndt calls *The United States* "a free translation, or at most, in some parts a reworking of the first volume of *Die Vereinigten Staaten*" (pp. xxxix–xl of the introduction to *The United States*).

<sup>3</sup> The phrase "fable of the republic" is used by Merrill Peterson in *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 5.

<sup>4</sup> Sealsfield, *Die Vereinigten Staaten von Nordamerika*, 3.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, v.

<sup>6</sup> Sealsfield, *The United States of North America*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 3–4.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 4–5. The Washington cult also finds its way into Sealsfield's fiction, most notably in *Morton oder die große Tour* (1835).

<sup>9</sup> This interpretation of the American Revolution is found in Roland Berthoff's essay "Independence and Attachment, Virtue and Interest: From Republican Citizen to Free Enterpriser, 1787–1837," in Richard L. Bushman, ed., *Uprooted Americans: Essays to Honor Oscar Handlin* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1979). See also Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1969).



<sup>10</sup> Rush Welter, *The Mind of America: 1820-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 34-35.

<sup>11</sup> Sealsfield, *Die Vereinigten Staaten*, iv.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

<sup>13</sup> Sealsfield, *The United States*, vii.

<sup>14</sup> Among the many works exploring this theme, see Richard Hofstadter, "Andrew Jackson and the Rise of Liberal Capitalism" in *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Vintage Books, 1948), 56-85.

<sup>15</sup> Hartmut Steinecke persuasively discusses the relationship between Sealsfield's fiction and his non-fiction, showing how his fiction emerged from his non-fiction as part of his strategy of promoting "politische Aufklärung" in Europe. See Hartmut Steinecke, "Literature als 'Aufklärungsmittel': Zur Neubestimmung der Werke Charles Sealsfields zwischen Österreich, Deutschland und Amerika," in Herbert Zeman, ed., *Die Österreichische Literatur: Ihr Profil im 19. Jahrhundert (1830-1860)* (Graz: Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, 1982), 399-422.

<sup>16</sup> Reinhard F. Spiess notes the political vibrancy of the republican idea in the reviews of Sealsfield's *Der Legitime und die Republikaner: Eine Geschichte aus dem letzten amerikanisch-englischen Kriege* (1833; reprint, Hildesheim, New York: Olms Presse, 1973): "Die Frage, ob die amerikanische Unabhängigkeitserklärung ein Akt des Hochverrats und der Mißachtung legitimer Rechte der britischen Krone darstellte, war keineswegs ausdiskutiert" (see Reinhard Spiess, *Charles Sealsfields Werke im Spiegel der literarischen Kritik: Eine Sammlung zeitgenössischer Rezensionen mit einer Einleitung herausgegeben* [Stuttgart: Charles Sealsfield-Gesellschaft, 1977], 17-18).

<sup>17</sup> Charles Sealsfield, *Morton oder die große Tour* (1835; reprint, Hildesheim, New York: Olms Presse, 1975), 1:130.

<sup>18</sup> It is rare to find a work of fiction which so aptly illustrates the ideas presented by Henry Nash Smith and other students of American myth. *Morton* is almost paradigmatic in its rendition of the conflict between pastoral values and the values of a burgeoning commercial capitalism.

<sup>19</sup> Karl J. R. Arndt, "Newly Discovered Sealsfield Relationships Documented," *Modern Language Notes* 87 (1972): 461.

<sup>20</sup> On this vast question of the ambivalence of Jefferson to slavery, see again Richard Hofstadter, "Thomas Jefferson: The Aristocrat as Democrat," in *The American Political Tradition*, 22-55.

<sup>21</sup> Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955), 145-58.

<sup>22</sup> Friedrich Sengle also notes this dual angle of vision running through Sealsfield's work, but ultimately does not take Sealsfield's American persona seriously. Still, Sengle comments on the "Zwiespalt zwischen dem gebildeten, durch die böhmische Adelswelt geprägten Beobachter und dem republikanischen Ideologen" (see Friedrich Sengle, *Biedermeierzeit: Deutsche Literatur im Spannungsfeld zwischen Restauration und Revolution, 1815-1848* [Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1971-80], vol. 3, *Die Dichter*, 786).

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte, 1800-1866: Bürgerwelt und starker Staat* (München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1983), 297-98. That Sealsfield's societal model was based on this "liberal ideal" can already be detected in his first book when he describes his American utopia: "Überall blickt ein Wohlstand hervor, der solid ist, denn er ruht auf festem Grunde, dem unerschütterlichen Eigenthumsprinzipie des Einzelnen. Der rechtliche, kluge und thätige Mann lebt nirgends so gut, so frei, so glücklich, als in Amerika" (see *Die Vereinigten Staaten*, 201).

<sup>24</sup> Nipperdey's suggestive phrase, "Ambivalenz gegenüber der Modernität" sums up the difficult position of the Liberals in the Vormärz period in *Deutsche Geschichte, 1800-1866*, 298. Roland Berthoff's equally suggestive phrase "quarrel with modernity" reflects the predicament of many Jacksonians in the already-cited essay.

<sup>25</sup> Sealsfield unequivocally expresses his admiration for the Virginia Dynasty in *The United States*: "Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, whatever any of their opponents might object against their party principles, were men whose memory ought to be cherished by the people of the United States" (p. 7).

<sup>26</sup> Peterson, *The Jefferson Image*, 85.

<sup>27</sup> The curious dilemma of being an aristocrat in a liberal world was, as Hartz shows,



part of the grand illusion of the American South after 1830—an illusion which made it possible to be an aristocrat and a liberal at the same time (see *The Liberal Tradition in America*, 146–59).

<sup>28</sup> Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, 120–21. The question of Sealsfield's political vision is treated most severely by Peter Krauss in his dissertation, "Sealsfield Politicien: Etude sur les aspects et les attitudes politiques dans l'oeuvre et dans la vie de l'écrivain autrichien Charles Sealsfield (Karl Postl)" (Ph.D. diss., Aix, 1973). Sealsfield emerges from this work as an arch-conservative. This is, of course, a simplification and does not do justice to Sealsfield's dual angle of vision and his difficult liberal predicament. Steinecke's words are apt here: "Ohne Zweifel ist Sealsfield nicht die musterhafte republikanische Leitfigur, zur der ihn Teile der Vormärzpresse und einige spätere Interpreten machen wollten. Dazu ist weder seine Haltung in der Sklavenfrage noch seine Vorstellung vom 'Aristokratischen' im Demokratismus angetan, um nur zwei besonders problematische Komplexe zu nennen. Auf der anderen Seite schießt man jedoch weit über das Ziel einer ausgewogenen Würdigung hinaus, wenn man ein Idealbild demokratisch-revolutionärer Gesinnung entwirft und das Tun und Denken Sealsfields und seiner Figuren daran mißt" (see the already-cited essay, "Literatur als 'Aufklärungsmittel,'" 418).

<sup>29</sup> Sealsfield, *Ralph Doughby's Esq. Brautfahrt* (1835; reprint Hildesheim, New York: Olms Presse, 1976), 230–31.

<sup>30</sup> This is perhaps the most distinctively American aspect of Sealsfield's thought—the symbolic construct of a hero in space, occupying a middle ground between the city and uncultivated nature. See the most recent application of Henry Nash Smith's approach to Sealsfield's fiction in Walter Grünzweig, *Das demokratische Kanaan: Charles Sealsfields Amerika im Kontext amerikanischer Literatur und Ideologie* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1987), 69–87.

<sup>31</sup> Sengle, *Biedermeierzeit*, vol. 1, *Allgemeine Voraussetzungen—Richtungen—Darstellungsmittel*, 48.

<sup>32</sup> Sealsfield, *Ralph Doughby's Esq. Brautfahrt*, 249. One of the difficulties in discussing Sealsfield's work is to distinguish between his American persona and his European sensibility. The choice of the American South as his utopian model enhances this difficulty, since the American South, in its literary conventions and themes, as well as in its cultural and philosophical attitudes, reveals many parallels with *Biedermeier* culture. Above all, the symbol of the house evokes similar meanings in antebellum American culture as it did in *Biedermeier* Europe. See Edward Halsey Foster's concept of "idealized domesticity" in *The Civilized Wilderness: Backgrounds to American Romantic Literature, 1817–1860* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 132–33. See also William R. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character* (New York: George Braziller, 1961) on themes and motifs in Southern fiction. Their similarity to some of Sengle's categories is astonishing.

<sup>33</sup> Sengle, *Biedermeierzeit*, 1:57. Sengle employs another important term, "organischer Liberalismus," to describe a political attitude of the *Biedermeier* period, which again makes it easy to see how the antebellum South could be a congenial realm for Sealsfield's European sensibility.

<sup>34</sup> Sealsfield, *Nathan, der Squatter-Regulator, oder der erste Amerikaner in Texas* (1837; reprint, Hildesheim, New York: Olms Presse, 1977), 331. The exact quote is quite illuminating, uttered by Major Gale, one of Sealsfield's many mentor figures: "'Ich versichere Sie, kein glücklicheres Leben, als der amerikanische Gentleman, der mit seinem Nachbarn in Harmonie lebt, und Herr und Meister auf seiner Scholle und in seinem Haus ist. Er ist der einzig freie Mann auf Erden.'" "

<sup>35</sup> Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), 4. Nathan's new settlement in Texas is described in the following way with an admixture of manifest destiny and *Biedermeier* Gemütlichkeit: "'Ich versichere Sie, es ist nicht mehr Riesenplan; mehr als zur Hälfte ist bereits realisiert. Die Niederlassung zählt über tausend Köpfe, ist ein förmlich eingerichteter kleiner Staat'" (p. 409 in *Nathan*).

<sup>36</sup> It cannot be emphasized enough how important Sealsfield's early non-fiction is for understanding his later fiction. Already in *The United States as They Are*, he describes quite clearly the constellation of forces in the Republic: "Though the United States exhibit a greater uniformity of manners than any other nation, yet there is still found a striking difference amongst them. In the Eastern seaports you will find the manners of a European metropolis, alloyed by the pride of wealth, which, as it is the only mark of distinction, is



not calculated to encourage courteous and social habits. In the central parts, from the Allegheny Mountains down to Cincinnati, a truly republican character is more than everywhere conspicuous. It is liberal, unassuming, hospitable, and independent" (p. 233).

<sup>37</sup> This letter is taken from the Albert B. Faust collection appended to his *Charles Sealsfield: Der Dichter beider Hemisphären* (Weimar: Emil Felber, 1897), 256.

<sup>38</sup> Faust, *Der Dichter beider Hemisphären*, 271.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

<sup>40</sup> John E. Crowley, "Classical and Other Traditions for the Understanding of Change in Post-Revolutionary America: The Idea of Decline," in John W. Eadie, ed., *Classical Traditions in America* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, 1976), 215.

<sup>41</sup> Paul Nagel, *This Sacred Trust: American Nationality, 1798-1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 156.

<sup>42</sup> Faust, 272-73.

<sup>43</sup> Among Alexander Ritter's contributions to Sealsfield scholarship is his discussion of Sealsfield's "gebrochene Utopievorstellung" in "Charles Sealsfield: Politischer Emigrant, freier Schriftsteller und die Doppelkrise von Amerika—Utopie und Gesellschaft im 19. Jahrhundert," *Freiburger Universitätsblätter* 75 (1982): 55. In an earlier work Ritter writes, "Der von Sealsfield sensibel aufgenommene Strukturwandel der amerikanischen Gesellschaft und Wirtschaft wird auch von anderen amerikanischen Dichtern ähnlich signalisiert. Die Vorstellung von der industriewirtschaftlich bestimmten Zukunftsgesellschaft kollidiert mit der pastoralen Idee von einer agrarwirtschaftlichen Gesellschaft der Bürger" ("Charles Sealsfields gesellschaftspolitische Vorstellungen und ihre dichterische Gestaltung als Romanzyklus," *Jahrbuch der deutschen Schillergesellschaft* 17 [1973]: 412).

<sup>44</sup> Faust, 272.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Spiess, *Charles Sealsfields Werke im Spiegel der Literaturkritik*, 25.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>49</sup> The Republicans did not have undisputed ideological hegemony in the *Vormärz*. This factor, according to Nipperdey, was one of the principal reasons for the failure of the Revolution of 1848. The monarchist influence was still very much alive (see Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte, 1800-1866*, 669).

<sup>50</sup> Spiess, 68.

<sup>51</sup> J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

<sup>52</sup> The rise of socialism and nationalism in Central Europe after 1848 made the republican alternative embodied in the *Amerika-Mythos* seem less important.

<sup>53</sup> On the rhetorical tradition of the jeremiad in America see Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978). Sealsfield's dilemma lay in the fact that he preached the jeremiad to Americans without proving beyond a reasonable doubt that he was an American and preached the jeremiad to German readers who, after 1848, were no longer unquestioning converts to the myth of America. As a "politischer Dichter" Sealsfield became a marginal figure.

<sup>54</sup> Berthoff, 99 (see n. 9).



