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# The "Political" and the German-American Press

The classic accounts of the German-American press attempt to explain its role by examining the manifest political content of German newspapers published in the United States; they ask, for example, what stand did the editors take on the question of slavery or America's entry into World War I? This kind of analytical framework ignores both popular journals like *Die Abendschule,* a weekly published in St. Louis from 1854 to 1940, whose fare was a mixture of serialized fiction, travelogues, and human interest stories, as well as the literature that invariably appeared in a special section of the overtly political journals. Using two stories published in *Die Abendschule* in 1880 as examples, I want to reexamine conventional notions of the apolitical function of literature using recent theoretical developments in the field of popular literature or, as it is known in the context of German literary studies, *Trivialliteratur.*[1] One question that can be answered in the process is whether *Die Abendschule* was merely "Ein deutsches Familienblatt für Belehrung und Unterhaltung," as its subtitle claimed, or if the literature it contained fulfilled what Jochen Schulte-Sasse has termed the "socio-psychological function of ideologically supporting readers' interpretive schemes or identities."[2] This article contends that only by expanding our notion of the political to include the social reproduction of norms and values within the aesthetic realm, while still looking at popular literature in its cultural, historical, and economic context, can we develop the framework necessary to assess the broad impact of the German-American press, not just its editorial positions.

In his history of *The German-Language Press in America,* Carl Wittke characterizes German-language newspapers at the turn of the century as follows: "The only distinctive feature of the German press, compared with typical American dailies, was the serial story and the section devoted to belles-lettres, known as the *feuilleton.*"[3] Aside from the apparently too obvious fact that German-American newspapers were printed in German and therefore provided their readers with a linguistic link to Europe at the same time as they helped shape a distinctive

German identity in the United States, the remark is significant for the conceptual scheme it reveals at the heart of Wittke's work. For if the novels, stories, and poems published in the German-American press are its one distinctive feature, one would expect an exhaustive analysis of their content and function. Instead, Wittke treats literature as an extraneous filler, whose sole purpose was to persuade readers to buy a paper in the hope that they would also read its editorial content—or, at least, browse through the advertisements for patent medicines and steamship tickets that were the real reason for the existence of a commercial press. Here Wittke carries on the tradition begun a generation earlier by the Chicago sociologist Robert Park, whose pioneering book, *The Immigrant Press and its Control,* contains but a single reference to the literature published in the foreign-language press in the United States: "The peasants [who comprised the majority of immigrants in Park's view] are sentimental; the editor prints poetry for them in the vernacular. He fills the paper with cheap fiction and writes loud-sounding editorials, double-leaded, so they will be easily read."[4] The real content of the immigrant press is thus reduced to what is overtly political, and politics' relationship to the rest of the paper is merely coincidental, except when advertisers attempt to intrude.[5]

By examining the political positions espoused by various papers, both Wittke and Park hope to explain how readers were influenced by specific editorial content. For example, after a lengthy discussion of various election issues seen through the eyes of the German-American press, Wittke concludes: "In Wisconsin the Germans voted for Hayes in 1876 largely because their newspapers had convinced them that he was sound on financial matters."[6] Studies of German-Americans in general, and of the German-American press in particular, abound with such statements, and unfortunately, both recent immigration history and the new social history have basically continued along Wittke's path. Wittke is therefore, for my purposes, symbolic of all those who have subscribed to his narrow definition of political content.[7]

The problem with this model is that it posits autonomous individuals, unfettered by ideology, rationally weighing alternatives and deciding freely on the merits of the arguments set before them. Even academics seldom make decisions on this basis, and there is little reason to believe that nineteenth-century German immigrants were any different. All behavior, even or especially political behavior, occurs in a historically specific, discursive framework, which sets the boundaries for what is thought to be legitimate or true. People's notions about how their world operates cannot be reduced to a series of rationally articulated beliefs; the planks in a party's platform, the issues of war and peace, and the problems of economic survival resonate as much in the people's hearts as in their minds. By speaking to those emotional needs, literature helped readers make sense of their world. If literature therefore provided immigrants with an interpretive orientation, even if only to compensate for the problems they experienced in their new environment, the traditional, but always implicit model of what constitutes the political in the German-American press is revealed to be so narrow that

it breaks down irreparably. This article is an attempt to challenge the act of exclusion that defines politics solely on the basis of overt content and thereby relegates literature to the margins, where a footnote or passing reference suffices to affirm its supposedly apolitical nature.

In order to demonstrate this contention I want to turn to the first narrative and look for its ideological or political content. The text is Wilhelm Ziethe's "Der Schlosser von Philadelphia," which appeared in *Die Abendschule* in three successive issues in August 1880.[8] The story concerns one Amos Sparks, the city's most skillful locksmith, who is called upon to open a rich merchant's safe. It seems that the merchant, a man by the name of Drummond, has lost the key. Drummond's problem is that he needs the money in the safe immediately to pay a bill of exchange, otherwise he will lose his reputation, which is the key to his success as a businessman. Sparks quickly picks the lock and demands five dollars for his services. When Drummond complains about the fee, Sparks responds: "Sie sollten darum auch meine Arbeit nicht nach der Zeit schätzen, die ich darauf verwandt habe, sondern nach dem Werthe, den sie in Ihren Augen hat und haben muß" (770). Sparks then shuts the safe and demands ten dollars to open it again. Drummond has no choice but to pay. In the next episode, Sparks is seen late at night near the Pennsylvania Bank; when a robbery is discovered there the next day, Drummond sets the police after Sparks, who is the only Philadelphia resident able to carry out the deed. Sparks was actually following his wayward apprentice, the orphaned son of his own master. Once arrested, Sparks trusts his own reputation for honesty and refuses to testify for fear of compromising the young man, who is already endangered by "allen Versuchungen der großen Stadt" (771). Sparks is found innocent, but his reputation is ruined, and he gradually sinks deeper and deeper into poverty. Eventually the real culprit, a New York safecracker, is discovered; Drummond apologizes; and Sparks refuses to sue the bank for damages because: "Sein guter Name und seine Ehre waren ja gerettet, sein Geschäft blühte wieder auf und seine Familie befand sich ganz behaglich und zufrieden" (803). When he finally does get $10,000 from the bank, he uses the bulk of the money to set up a fund "aus welcher nothleidende Meister und Gesellen des Handwerkerstandes unterstützt werden sollten" (803).

The question is why a story about a locksmith published in 1880 is political, i.e., what if anything is its ideological content? The answer is connected with the expansion and consolidation of the United States economy in the decades after the Civil War; industrialization meant that steam replaced human muscle, steel replaced iron, and large-scale enterprises, with their rational and hierarchical organizations, replaced small-scale production.[9] For my purposes, however, the important variables are not the facts of economic development but the discursive precipitate of that process found in texts like Ziethe's.

The story's plot is structured by the opposition between Sparks and the merchant Drummond, an opposition that propels the narrative forward, because the semantic markers that define the two characters create an unavoidable conflict between two antagonistic worldviews. As

an artisan Sparks represents a precapitalist economic order, whose values are at odds with everything that Drummond stands for. Sparks is an autonomous, independent producer, whereas Drummond, for all his wealth, lives from others' labor and is nevertheless at the mercy of his creditors. Moreover, as Sparks admonishes Drummond, the artisan's unalienated labor is to be rewarded not according to the abstract, quantifying measure of time, but "nach dem Werthe, den sie in Ihren Augen hat und haben muß." Sparks is also characterized by the trait of family loyalty. Not only are Sparks's wife and three children named in the course of the exposition, but his difficulties with the law arise when he is unwilling to sacrifice his adopted apprentice's reputation for the sake of his own security. Unlike the locksmith's *ganzes Haus*, where work and family life are still united, Drummond's house is important only as the location of his safe.

If we examine the bundle of semantic markers that define Sparks, and by way of contrast, his adversary Drummond as well, namely the values represented by the autonomous individual, by unalienated production, by unquantifiable worth, and by the family, the resulting ideology is virtually synonymous with what Jackson Lears calls "antimodernism." For Lears, antimodernism couples the longing for an intact, organic community with the rejection of urban market society, which "undermined individual autonomy and promoted social interdependence. Ordinary people's livelihood depended increasingly on decisions made in distant cities, on circumstances largely beyond the individual's control."[10] Men like Drummond, capitalists, and particularly merchants and bankers, were viewed as the chief villains in a system whose continual expansion threatened the existence of the class of independent producers who would have been reckoned to the old middle class in Germany. For them, and their counterparts in the United States, the threat of a gradual, or even sudden fall into the ranks of the proletariat was very real. When Jay Cooke's Philadelphia bank closed its doors in 1873, for example, the ensuing panic threw the whole American economy into a tailspin.[11] In the fictional world of *Die Abendschule*, however, traditional values triumph, and the bank is even forced to finance a fund for "nothleidende Meister und Gesellen." Seen against this background, "Der Schlosser von Philadelphia" is anything but apolitical entertainment.

This fairly direct connection with the world in which the story was published should not lead to the conclusion that a narrative's ideological content is necessarily so obvious.[12] One of the most widespread genres of popular literature in the nineteenth century was historical fiction. For German-Americans the fact that the historical narratives they read were often set in the heroic past of the German nation was no doubt an important means of fostering and cementing a specifically German identity. Germans in such stories regularly triumph over foreigners of some sort, often against the other ethnic groups Germans faced in the United States, and major figures from German history generally make an appearance, too. In addition, these stories reinforce the values analyzed above.

Louise Pichler's "Der Sohn der Wittwe," which was published in *Die Abendschule* in four parts during May and June 1880, is a good example of the genre.[13] Set at the end of the twelfth century during the reign of Kaiser Friedrich Barbarossa, the text is structured by two sets of oppositions: an apprentice swordsmith and his widowed mother on the one hand are pitted against the ruling countess and her ne'er-do-well son on the other. A month before the widow's son Guntram is to submit his *Meisterstück,* which would enable him to rebuild his father's decrepit workshop, he is drafted into the imperial army. Since he is the sole support of his mother, the order is illegal, but the power-hungry countess is unwilling to overturn it, because she was bribed by an official who wanted to protect his own son. Meanwhile, the young count, who has reached the age of majority, prefers "am kaiserlichen Hofe oder auf einer Turnierfahrt zu verweilen, als sich mit der Bewirtschaftung seiner Güter zu befassen" (564). On the imperial front Kaiser Barbarossa, although hard-pressed to defend his Italian territories, is unwilling to sell off his German possessions to raise money for mercenaries: "ich bin kein Kaufmann, der Seelen verschachert um Geld!" (581). Guntram, now a soldier because, as he puts it: "wenn der Kaiser so in Noth ist, dann Schande jedem, der die Waffen tragen kann und zurück bleibt" (582), eventually saves Barbarossa's life, while the rest of the army is defeated. In order to raise more troops Barbarossa needs the support of the Pavian nobility, who think him dead. Guntram helps him return there, but, instead of acting imperial in front of the assembled notables, Barbarossa embraces his wife in their presence, "während seine kleinen Söhne jubelnd des Vaters Knie umfaßten" (612). In the end Barbarossa conquers his enemies; the countess apologizes to Guntram, who brings news that her son is alive and ready to assume his position in the principality; and Guntram turns down a knighthood in favor of the house and workshop that the kaiser had initially promised him. As he explains to his mother: "ich habe ein eigenes Haus, darin Weib und Kind, die mich lieben, und dich—was sollte mir eitle Ehre? Meine Arbeit freut und nährt mich, darum danke ich Gott, der so viel Gutes an mir gethan und mich aufs Beste geführt hat" (616).

In spite of the seven hundred years that separate them, in ideological terms the two stories are virtually identical. The regressive utopia of "Der Schloser von Philadelphia" has simply been projected into a mythic past. Like Amos Sparks, Guntram is an artisan, and the semantic bundle that defines him in the narrative includes the same characteristics of autonomous individuality and support for the family, the latter again defined in terms of the *ganzes Haus*. Kaiser Barbarossa, with whom he shares those traits, adds the anticapitalist dimension; loyalty to his German subjects cannot be reduced to the money he needs for his Italian campaign. The young count, by way of contrast, is dependent on the court for his entertainment, and he neglects both his family and his profession. Unlike the kaiser the countess values a bribe more than the demands of justice and traditional law. The fact that Guntram's success

occurs in the medieval German past makes the antimodernism complete.

The text's final passage raises another ideological element that is characteristic of *Die Abendschule,* namely religion. Lears makes much of the decline of evangelical fervor and even the secularization of American culture in the late nineteenth century, but his focus is largely on high culture.[14] However, I am convinced that traditional religion continued to play an important role in the ideological framework of the middle class, as well as the working class in the United States, if not in Germany. In any event religion was invariably important to the postive characters in the narratives published in *Die Abendschule,* which was loosely, though unofficially, connected with the forerunner of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and always considered itself a Christian family journal. After he is arrested, Amos Sparks consoles his wife by telling her: "Der alte Gott in Israel lebt noch und er wird den Unschuldigen erretten und den Schuldigen schon an das Licht bringen" (786). In fact, the countess is undone by her reliance on secular power relationships, whereas Guntram's mother trusts in God. Religion is thus an additional semantic marker that helps to determine the oppositions at the heart of these two narratives.

It is important to reiterate the observation that such oppositions both structure the characters and propel the plots in these texts; the ideological component is not merely present as a series of motifs, nor is it relegated to commentaries made by the narrator. The distinction is important if we now briefly turn to the way that such narratives were read.

Every society delegates the transmission of norms and values to some institution. In Western culture that role was traditionally played by the church, but ever since the late eighteenth century literature increasingly replaced institutional religion as the major forum for the discussion of norms and values. From Gottsched to the early Schiller, literature was viewed as an instrument for critiquing and changing society. However, once the Enlightenment's pedagogic optimism proved untenable, and once the Romantics retreated to the esoteric world of art for its own sake, the function of inculcating norms and values passed from high literature to popular narratives—where the ideological content was far more conservative.

This is not to argue that popular narratives simply transmit ideology. Literature is seldom successful when plot merely serves as the occasion for a series of lectures or sermons—whether on morality or whaling; literature's preferred mode of operation is to represent norms indirectly. As we have seen, characters are constructed to embody particular traits, either positively or negatively, or to reveal these same traits through their actions. Moreover, if the reader has invested a certain amount of emotional energy in a character, i.e., identified with him or her, what that person says is far more meaningful than the narrator's asides. In fact, the most distinctive feature of both these texts is the centrality of a figure with whom the reader can identify. (Of course, this hypothetical reader is better off as a male; there are positive female characters, but

their roles are clearly subordinate.) Since both characters and plot are constructed with oppositions that define a particular world view, the act of identification necessarily involves the implicit acceptance of that character's ideological stance. Readers can take that step because of the parallels between the extra-literary world and the world of the text. The norms and values of "Der Schlosser von Philadelphia" and "Der Sohn der Wittwe" are to a large extent already present and internalized. Faced in their own lives by the same opponents as Amos Sparks and Guntram, namely by the process of industrialization and the discourse surrounding it, readers are given the chance to succeed vicariously. As Schulte-Sasse puts it: ". . . popular literature . . . fulfills the socio-psychological function of supporting readers' interpretive schemes or identities. It does so by providing an imaginary realm in which 'outmoded' norms and values are once again revitalized."[15] The protagonists are successful in doing what their readers, against all odds, would like to believe possible in their own lives; Guntram and Amos Sparks were able to live out the ideology of the petit bourgeoisie fictionally in a world where those norms and values were increasingly threatened and irrelevant.

In conclusion I want to suggest that the literature contained in the German-American press, and indeed all literature, is intensely political. Thus when Wittke characterizes *Die Abendschule* by saying: "[it] preached conservative Americanism and devoted most of its space to American events, but avoided politics as a matter of principle. Essentially the paper was a literary family journal,"[16] he deconstructs his own oxymoronic conclusion. In practice, by excluding those texts that do not deal expressly with political events, Park, Wittke, and their successors have defined away most of what is really political, namely the ideological frameworks within which elections, wars, and moral crusades take place. Wittke's characterization of *Die Abendschule* is wrong because it fosters an inadequate analysis of what is political and leaves German-American literature to the filiopietists.

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## Notes

[1] For an overview see Jochen Schulte-Sasse, "Trivialliteratur," in *Reallexikon der deutschen Literaturgeschichte*, 2nd. ed. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1981), 4:562–83. In Germany *Die Gartenlaube*, a journal that was similar to *Die Abendschule*, has received the most attention from the scholars of popular literature; see, for example, Heidemarie Gruppe, *"Volk" zwischen Politik und Idylle in der "Gartenlaube" 1853–1914* (Frankfurt/M.: Peter Lang, 1976), and Anne-Susanne Rischke, *Die Lyrik in der "Gartenlaube" 1853–1903* (Frankfurt/ M.: Peter Lang, 1982).

[2] Jochen Schulte-Sasse, "Toward a 'Culture' for the Masses: The Socio-Psychological Function of Popular Literature in Germany and the U.S., 1880–1920," *New German Critique* 29 (1983): 85.

One could easily complement the more thematic analysis that Schulte-Sasse suggests with an explicit examination of the ideological function of narrative form. See, for example,

Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations of the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1979), especially 125–72.

[3] Carl Wittke, *The German-Language Press in America* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1957), 217.

[4] Robert E. Park, *The Immigrant Press and its Control* (New York: Harper, 1922), 72.

[5] The "control" in Park's title refers to pressure exerted by Louis N. Hammerling in his efforts to manipulate advertising revenue through the American Association of Foreign Language Newspapers (see Park, 377ff.).

[6] Wittke, 161.

[7] See, for example, Steven Rowan and James Neal Primm, *Germans for a Free Missouri: Translations from the St. Louis Press, 1857–1862* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1983), which uses commentaries from the German press in an attempt to determine the role the Germans played in the struggle to keep Missouri in the Union. While their attempt to expand the sources available to American historians is admirable, and admirably well done, in my view, the difficulty is that Rowan and Primm cast their net too narrowly. As an indication of how easy it would be to compile a list of articles whose focus is just as restrictive I would cite Hubert Heinen, "German-Texan Attitudes toward the Civil War," and Rainer Sell, "Der Deutsche Pioneer-Verein von Cincinnati, Heinrich Armin Rattermann, and *Der Deutsche Pioneer:* A Nucleus of Nineteenth-Century German-America," *Yearbook of German-American Studies* 20 (1985): 19–32, 49–60, respectively.

[8] *Die Abendschule,* 13, 21, 28 August 1880, 769–72, 785–90, 801–3. Ziethe (1824–1901) spent much of his life as a popular pastor in Berlin. This raises the problematical question of the author's nationality, because, although "Der Schlosser von Philadelphia" was published in book form by the Pilgerbuchhandlung in Reading, PA, in 1895, it is unclear whether Ziethe was ever in the U.S. Before the advent of international copyright laws at the end of the nineteenth century pirating texts was the normal form of business for magazines. German-American publications regularly stole (or perhaps paid for) material from authors living in Germany, perhaps, because they were less of a gamble than unproven German-American authors. Initially, of course, there were also very few of the latter. In any case it might help to think of *Die Abendschule* as an institution with a certain historical continuity, in which an audience's needs were addressed, more or less successfully, by whoever wrote there; choosing to publish a German rather than a German-American author was also a statement in the discourse that constituted the identity of Germans in America. This would obviate the problem of the national origin of *Die Abendschule*'s authors at the level of ideology; those who spoke to the issues at hand, whatever their nationality, were printed. The important issue is, after all, how those popular narratives functioned for German-American readers.

[9] Numerous economic histories relate the general outlines of this story, for example, Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), 247ff.

[10] Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), 34.

[11] See Zinn, 237. The involvement of prominent members of the Grant administration and of the congress in the Crédit Mobilier scandal earlier in that same year added to public sentiment against banks. The world depression that the U.S. was dragged into was triggered by a bank panic in Vienna.

[12] This is part of the mistake made by Dorothy Skårdal's *The Divided Heart: Scandinavian Immigrant Experience through Literary Sources* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1974). Skårdal contends that the fiction produced by immigrants has documentary value for social historians; she mistakenly believes that only those texts whose content can be "checked" against historical "reality" reveal anything about the life of immigrants.

[13] Louise Pichler (1823–89), who apparently resided exclusively in Germany, was the author of numerous historical narratives. A subtitle claims that this story was "bearbeitet für *Die Abendschule,*" but it is unclear if this means that it was commissioned by the journal or merely adapted by someone else. See *Die Abendschule,* 14 May–4 June 1880, 562–66, 577–82, 593–98, 609–16.

[14] See, for example, Lears, 32–47.

[15] Schulte-Sasse, 85.

[16] Wittke, 180.