Karla Lydia Schultz

"Think: You Could Become an American . . .": Three Contemporary German Poets Respond to America

For generations of Europeans, America has been both literary topos[1] and promising new habitat. We may recall, for example, Goethe's envious tribute across the ocean:

> not bothered by strife
> while living your life
> not torn internally
> by futile memory,[2]

or remember angry young Heine's relief when thinking of the New World: ". . . even if all of Europe should turn into one single dungeon, there still would exist one hole to make one's escape: America. And thank God—the hole is even bigger than the dungeon."[3] Neither, as we know, ever set foot on the American continent.

More recently, America has become a place to be visited and a force to be confronted. The dream has become a text to be analyzed. I will turn to a most traumatic time in the history of America's image, the late 1960s to mid-1970s. The following views by three contemporary German poets, expressed at the height of the Vietnam War and shortly thereafter, show an ambivalence that ranges from longing to wariness to condemnation, from loving recall to detached observation to political statement. All three writers arrived in the role of academic visitor (two from the Federal Republic of Germany, one from the German Democratic Republic), yet each in his way relinquished this role to take a stand: one to embrace the America of the everyday, one to rebuke a power-hungry colossus, one to examine the moonscape of what he calls "the other planet."

In a poem that appeared right after his visiting lectureship at the University of Texas in 1975, Martin Walser concludes: "So I admit: I can't reconcile this capitalist America about which the globe rumbles and the concrete America that I experienced."[4] Throughout, the poem

treats the rift between an official America of power politics and media smog and an unofficial one of friendly temporariness and wide, perpetual skies. In sharp contrast to this double vision stands the unequivocal indictment by Hans Magnus Enzensberger, who declares in an open letter to the president of Wesleyan University seven years earlier: "I believe the class which rules the United States of America, and the government which implements its policies, to be the most dangerous body of men on earth."[5] Located somewhere in between is Günter Kunert's futile attempt to capture America's truth. Like Walser a visiting professor in Texas (1972–73), he concentrates on America's surfaces, ponders its visual impact: "That which is American . . . has an atmospheric quality, something that surrounds one without lending itself to exact definition. One only *thinks* one knows the places where it is present" (emphasis mine).[6]

Significantly, these views take on their own, appropriate form. Enzensberger's "Open Letter" is a public statement, sharp and determined in tone, whereas Walser's poem, "Attempt to Understand a Feeling," is a very personal, lyrical reflection. Kunert's travel vignettes alternate between poetry and prose. I will turn to Enzensberger's letter first, not only because it precedes the other two confrontations, but because its analysis, though dating from 1968, has gained renewed meaning in light of current United States policy in Central America.

The occasion for Enzensberger's letter is his resignation from his fellowship, a grant he feels he can no longer accept in light of a growing conviction: that an intellectual's thoughts are compromised by contradictory actions. For him, a continued stay as the official guest of an institution whose government is embroiled in an aggressive, imperialist war, would be just such a compromise. His letter, at the risk of appearing ungrateful, affirms that the personal is the political. Enzensberger enumerates the defense mechanisms he sees at work in his immediate surroundings, in academia. Inside the university, as well as outside of it, these mechanisms have become the tools of intellectual trade—not just in the United States, but, in a telling manner, especially there. They are excuses to shut one's eyes, justifications for a politics of unmitigated power.

The first defense mechanism Enzensberger cites operates on the semantic level. While many of the sexually charged words formerly regarded as obscene have become socially acceptable, politically charged words such as "imperialism" and "exploitation" have been tabooed. The result is a neurotic use of euphemisms that tries to cover up the political situation in truly obscene fashion.

The second defense mechanism employs the "mental-health" approach. A critical assessment of United States policies and procedures in terms of class interests is considered paranoid. Basically, so the defense argument goes, the powerful in this country are people like everyone else. However, because they are in a responsible position, they are also more informed, more knowledgeable, more farsighted than the rest. To accuse them of special interests, it is argued, is simply the sign of an unhealthy obsession.

The third defense mechanism mixes simplistic scare tactics with broad generalizations. It also takes the offense by accusing the accuser of communist propaganda. Such an operation, Enzensberger writes, is as irrational as it is inaccurate. It lumps together the most disparate concerns as expressed, for example, "by Greek liberals and Latin American archbishops, by Norwegian peasants and French industrialists" (32). An imaginary vanguard of "Communism" is invoked; highly differentiated issues based on particular histories, geographies, and economics are reduced to their alleged common denominator: being a threat to freedom and therefore to America.

Most Americans, Enzensberger submits, do not know what they look like to others. He himself lays no claim to being an outsider, to belonging to the injured and innocent. As a German, he is aware of the look that others place on the guilty, regardless of whether their guilt stems from inheritance, association, or deed:

> . . . most Americans have no idea of what they and their country look like to the outside world. I have seen the glance that follows them: tourists in the streets of Mexico, soldiers on leave in Far Eastern cities, businessmen in Italy or Sweden. The same glance is cast on your embassies, your destroyers, your billboards all over the world. . . . I will tell you why I recognize this look. It is because I am German. It is because I have felt it on myself. (32)

Striking parallels exist between the American situation of the 1960s and the situation in Germany two generations earlier: racial discrimination and persecution (often in the guise of patriotism), governmental support of counterrevolutionary wars, and alarming increases in the armament budget. Obvious differences concern a mind-boggling potential to destroy the world many times over and, hand in hand with an ever more refined technology, the subtlest means yet to integrate, hence suppress, voices of opposition. The American system, unlike the earlier German one, can afford to do without overt censorship and repression, because the freedoms it offers are sold at the price of institutional integration of dissent. Alibis for a good conscience are easy to come by.

Enzensberger's analysis is a harsh one. It allows for little or no movement within the system. He therefore wants to extricate himself as much as he can—not by returning to Europe, but by turning to a country where a revolution has taken place. "I have made up my mind to travel to Cuba and to work there for some time. This is hardly a sacrifice on my part; I just feel that I can learn more from the Cuban people and be of greater use to them than I could be to the students of Wesleyan University" (32). He perceives America as a massively united state, a powerful totality that ultimately grants only the "love-it-or-leave-it" choice to those who inhabit it.

A determination to take a stand, with words as well as with action, permeates the letter. A well-known poet, Enzensberger is not after publicity; he wants to provoke necessary yet rarely posed questions, especially among political-minded intellectuals like himself: ". . . my

case is moot by itself, of no importance or interest to the outside world. However, the questions which it raises do not concern me alone" (32). In line with his position, Enzensberger will not publish poems until well into the seventies. Instead, he gives speeches and interviews, writes articles, a documentary play, a novel about anarchy. Eventually, though, he will distance himself from this letter, that is, from its activist gesture. In retrospect, he will feel that he should have left America quietly, or better: thought better about accepting his fellowship in the first place. Mere gestures, he will say, neither make for good politics nor good writing.[7]

Martin Walser's lyrical recollection of his American visit, "Attempt to Understand a Feeling," also poses a question, but an open-ended one. The remembrance of his encounter with America takes the form of a search. The poem begins by probing a feeling. The history of this feeling is traced to concrete experiences and sensations, while its impulse, pursued in a series of questions, goes toward something distant and unknown. "Attempt to Understand a Feeling" searches the past for the future:

> Who will explain to me my homesickness for America?
> What must make up the tone that reaches from here to Texas and lasts as long as the lovely sky there?
> What am I to do with the splendid oaks, the cedars, countless, that have begun to take root again in my mind?
> . . . . . .
> Was it the unrelenting heat?
> Was it the roads that always reached to the horizon?
> . . . . . .
> Could my homesickness for America be a homesickness for the future? (61)

Together with the sensations of landscape, vegetation, and climate, the speech sounds and constructs of the people are recalled:

> How can I handle the immortal phrases from the supermarket, which still are imbued with the Southern tinge of the lips from which they came? Why does the gas station remain with me as though it were done by Michelangelo? (59)

The cultured stance of the European turns to self-irony; strange impressions become stranger yet through inadequate comparisons. Walser's search is propelled by incongruity. Formally, this is reflected by the loose structure of the poem. The eleven unrhymed stanzas or sections are of unequal length, alternating between poetry and prose, point and counterpoint, bodily sensation and critical insight:

> Didn't the renowned New York paper make me shudder by its slanted indifference?
> . . . . . .

> Didn't the Mexican who built my apartment pay for my rent being so low?
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Maybe I am susceptible to beautiful weather.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Maybe it's most of all the effect of the distance from here. (60)

The pivotal term of Walser's poem is "distance." The land where "bend after bend of the Mississippi glistens up under the airplane wing," where trucks pass on the interstate with a "Pentecostal roar," where Tennessee "chases the sun with so many hills" is of a geographic expanse that is incomprehensible to the Euroepan eye, whether in reality or in recollection. America, seemingly so open to the stranger, is not only vast; it presents itself quite impenetrable in its material and ideological density. The visitor remains removed, though perhaps sees more keenly because he sees differently. There is the new urban architecture, asserting itself in "the concrete scarf that Houston wears"; there is the ritual of combative sports, where football stars "thrust their great strength on the ball disappeared at the bottom of the pile," and there is—irreconcilable contradiction to America's open skies and horizons—"the cloud cover, produced daily by the communications industry and by the entertainment industry" (61).

There is also the distance within the culture, among its own people, which is cultivated as an illusion of nearness. It appears in the historical costume of celebrations and parades ("the brass band . . . like on the postcard from 1910"), in the sugary homeyness of chain restaurants ("the pancake house on the interstate"), and in the eroticized advertisement of capital: "Was it the girl on TV, who lets slogans from Franklin Savings & Loan melt totally on her lips?" (60). It also appears and is experienced as a false identification with the powerful and socially dominant, who present themselves as near and familiar: "Did I not have a fraternal feeling for Nixon and Agnew . . . ?"

The counter-concept to distance that moves Walser's poem is his experience of an invisible yet tangible idea: democracy. The pervasiveness of this idea, the vistas it opens, make Walser pursue his question, make him wonder about his longing for America. He calls on the most American of American poets, Walt Whitman, who envisioned freedom arising from a great land:

> Maybe I came upon your Democracy, Walt Whitman, in bars, lecture halls, department stores, and on beaches.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> All of America is the periphery for a center that is not a capital city with imperialistic stucco, victory column, parade grounds, Immortality Boulevard. The center for which America is the periphery is the idea that will also overcome capitalism: Democracy. (61)

Although an intellectual himself, Walser distances his experience from the theoretical criticism of his peers. He makes no reference to social

groups and conditions he does not know. His recollection goes toward the actual people he met. He defends the particular, the everyday, the vast and motley middle class:

> I was in the big small towns on Sundays and weekdays, always in the middleclass, nowhere did I meet the plastic people that the intellectual has to come across in America. (62)

He senses something new underway in the behavior of these people. He is encouraged, for example, by the easy-going worship of many and small gods—the stars of the media industry. These "gods" are the most humanlke yet in history, because they are man-made and recognized as such. He detects in their popularity, their fleeting stardom, a theology with a new direction: "yes, mankind finally wants to worship itself." There is hope in this theology of temporary gods, since the hells it creates promise to be temporary as well. Differently put, as people realize that they create their conditions, they will realize also that they can change them. "I am captivated by America's hells that need less theology to operate than any other hells in the world: so they seem more easily done away with" (62).

Temporariness and uncertainty, finally, are the criteria that distinguish America from Europe in Walser's poem. While in the America of his remembered vision "nobody is quite sure of himself," Europe, the old country, seems to tinge everything with "ceremonious self-assuredness." Satiated with a tradition where everyone and everything has its place, where social hierarchy is hewn in stone, it is "a vainglorious funeral culture," a culture where greed and the status quo go hand in hand with an oft-rehearsed pessimism. "One gets old and rich but talks incessantly about dying." Perhaps it is not the real America after all, perhaps it is the America that Europe lacks, which prompts Walser to end his poem with the wish to forget and be able to hope. He ponders the invigorating sensation of natural and human energy that his visit has left in him:

> I'd like to be in Virginia, the land of the leaves, to forget,
> I'd like to be in Texas and learn how to brag,
> I'd like to be far away. (62)

Walser's and Enzensberger's opposing views bring out the contradictions that America presents to the world: a politics of aggressive imperialism, yoked to the daily-lived promise of a future. While Enzensberger condemns the politics, Walser tries to capture the promise. One, by deciding to make a point, leaves out shadings and differentiations; the other, by including them, is led to a declaration of love. One draws a picture of America within the world, the other of America within. The letter addresses a public figure; the poem engages in a dialogue with a self. The forms prescribe their constraints.

Neither of the poets comes to see America innocently; both bring to it their post-Second World War West-German perspective. Enzensberger perceives the United States as a continuation and intensification of a

socio-political tradition that wreaked havoc in Europe; he indicts a historically all too familiar, capitalist rationality that now threatens to destroy the Third World, and possibly everyone. From this perspective, the central line of Walser's poem, his hopeful and future-directed reminder, "Think: you could become an American," takes on an ominous tone.

Yet from the context of the poem, the same line emerges as utopian, as an encouragement to move toward the future with liberating uncertainty. There is no mention of America the colossus, or America the threat. Invoked is a country of beauty and energy, of hard-to-fathom contradictions and preoccupied, easy-going people. The United States, in this light, does not figure as the continuation of a European tradition but as a qualitatively different habitat: "America, as though for always temporary." Its landscape invites forgetfulness to set hope free.

But does this not also imply an escape? Walser's line suggests the questionable notion that history can be overcome by geography, that the temporary will yield to space. For example, how are we to read Walser's wish: "I'd like to be on the Rio Grande, mix Apache echoes with those of Auschwitz"? Does this mean that the vast American land can muffle the accumulated sounds of history like so much receding thunder? America, though often considered as such by Europeans, is not a getaway. Still, "Think: you could become an American" is a line that has been energized by the dreams of generations of immigrants, by the dream of what might be possible. Read against Enzensberger's "Open Letter," it is also a line that reminds us that America's promise is tied inextricably to its politics.

Günter Kunert's response to America seems to represent the dystopian counterpart to Walser's vision, yet also differs importantly from Enzensberger's indictment. It is neither expressly political nor personal. On the surface, his collection of prose vignettes, *The Other Planet*, as well as his sequence of travel poems, remain detached observations. There is no political claim, no individualized feeling. Instead, the surface of a moonscape is evoked:

> All these stone cubes, barren
> or embellished, seem
> a geometric excrescence
> of the rocky ground, without content
> . . . Manhattan is empty.[8]

In Kunert's poems, all of America appears empty, ancient, marked by the traces of a thoroughly accomplished reificaton. People appear rarely. If they do, they are masklike puppets, patterned after the stereotypes of the media industry:

> There arrives the car of the sheriff,
> there appears a belly, sanctified by the colt,
> from beneath the Stetson the pale
> and plump sphere poses as head.[9]

An eerie silence shrouds a landscape that is hostile to humans. It is best left alone, traversed by car, perceived through windows. Inscribed in it there are signs that nature, transgressed against, will triumph in the end:

> The blood of dead armadillos
> on the road often forms
> signs
> read by no-one since no-one stops
> since no-one dares
> since
> most vital the fear
> that he will lose himself
> who sets on the plain into the void
> his feet.[10]

Kunert alternates in his observations between the stance of the surveyor of a lost continent and the child lost in a magic theater. "The true America," he writes in one of his vignettes, "the real one, or what we consider as such, is an image that dissolves, only to reveal a new image that in turn is fixed neither by constancy nor validity." Since America, for him, spells radical otherness, we might ask whether Europe, then, provides the *terra firma,* is the land of direction and the future. One of his commentators submits that his portrait of a barren American landscape implies as counter-image the plentiful, socialist garden cultivated by the German Democratic Republic.[11]

Kunert gives an answer of sorts in a later essay, "Das Amerikanische." He locates that which is American on the margin of the general, optical impression. It resides along the artificial seam where civilization and nature meet—not in harmony, but in contradiction.

> It is the opposition and permanently crass contradiction between that which we call by the aestheticizing term "landscape" (always thinking an invisible gold frame along with it), and the buildings not accepted by the landscape, structures to which it remains shut. A stark dissonance, unknown in Europe, forms the basis for the visual environment.[12]

Kunert does not make a value judgment but, in the course of the essay, suggests the notion of *Ungleichzeitigkeit* (a lag between material conditions and consciousness) or, to adapt Ernst Bloch's concept to Kunert's context, the difference between the conditions of nature and a superimposed technology. The evident break between the two shows what in Europe, due to geography and history, either has been reconciled, or covered over and repressed.

What Walser praises as encouraging temporariness, Kunert characterizes as the defensive-aggressive invasion of an inimical land. It is not the downtown areas he has in mind (they appear firmly in place like those in Europe), but the shack-type architecture on the edges of cities or in the middle of nowhere. He cites this sprawl for economic and historical reasons, not out of aesthetic concern. Each of these shacks,

whether large or small, industrial or commercial structure, fast-food or motel chain, is in competition with the land, signifies a tenuous triumph. Each carries besides its actual sign the invisible sign of a devil-may-care attitude: "Who cares what happens after I'm gone—life and profit are now." Nature is viewed in entirely utilitarian terms. There is no connection to it if it cannot be used, cannot be exploited.

The fact that capitalism is at work offers only half the explanation. Kunert reminds his readers of American settlement history. The settlers and pioneers, by and large, were people without privilege, refugees, desperados, criminals, the poor—in short: people shortchanged by their societies. Their psyche was marked by existential insecurity, by the will to survive. These traits Kunert detects in the buildings of their descendants, visual reminders of a rough history: "Naked products of utilitarianism in the face of a land that, for the most part, is more formidable, always more expansive than the European landscape; spread out forbiddingly, remote, and in its nature appropriate only to its natives, not its settlers" (80).

Nonetheless, the conclusion Kunert draws in his essay strikes a hopeful note. He detects a "coming-to-self-consciousness" in America, relatively free of ingrained conventions. Young Americans, after the lost war in Vietnam and after failed United States missions at world salvation, are turning to what is truly American, what has stayed dormant throughout a falsely reassuring ideology: the ancient, unresolved tension between man and nature. They are beginning to examine its dynamic, its pitfalls and its promise. The tension, unlike its settled European version, is still in motion. It thus constitutes "one of the unsettling deep structures, on which so much that may come about in this strange country rests" (82).

It is not clear from these remarks whether Kunert means that America will eventually catch up with Europe, or whether the future, stagnating in Europe, belongs to a land he calls "the other planet." He is both attracted and repelled by it. Significantly, he ends his travel reports with an epilogue on why he almost would have been an American himself, telling of the short-lived emigration of his great-grandfather.

In light of his prose, should we then discount the dystopian vision of his poems? The poem "Downtown Manhattan on Sunday Afternoon" presents a challenging example. It plays out a futuristic fantasy, staged between and above Enzensberger's politically motivated rejection and Walser's nostalgic embrace. It also, we might add, serves as negative foil to yet another American vision, the image of plenitude that Ingeborg Bachmann, on the occasion of her academic visit to the United States in the 1950s, evokes in *The Good God of Manhattan*: "And people felt alive, wherever they went, felt part of this city—the only one they ever invented and designed for each of their needs. This city of cities, which received all in their restlessness and agony, in which everything could come to pass."[13]

In Kunert's version, the quintessential American city appears as a void:

All these stone cubes, barren
or embellished, seem
a geometric excrescence
of the rocky ground, without content,
or preserve behind innumerable windows
countless pupated creatures
or merely dried-up folk wrapped
in plastic foil.[14]

Should we interpret the poem's measured enumeration of human abscence, of technological indifference, of alienation and reification, as the backdrop to the idea that America still awaits discovery? Sunday afternoon, when the business district, the heart of the city, goes dead, when the inhabitants are elsewhere to satisfy their real and conditioned needs, is not a time. It is a figure of absence. The planet is suspended. In the poem, Manhattan's population has disappeared to populate the moon: "Now they are / all up there, and Manhattan is empty." It may happen, Kunert continues,

after everything has happened already, that some day
someone from somewhere
discovers this area between East River and Hudson
and arrives here and lands.

From such post-historical perspective, the line, "Think: you could become an American," ominous in Enzensberger's context, promising in Walser's, takes on a radical openness: it remains blank.

University of Oregon
Eugene, Oregon

Notes

[1] From Goethe to Brecht, there is hardly a major German writer who did not address America at some time or other. See especially Sigrid Bauschinger, Horst Denkler, Wilfried Malsch, eds., *Amerika in der deutschen Literatur: Neue Welt—Nordamerika—USA* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun., 1975).

[2] Erich Schmidt, ed., *Goethes Werke in sechs Bänden* (Leipzig: Insel Verlag, n.d.), 1:254. (Unless otherwise noted all translations by Karla Lydia Schultz.)

[3] Oskar Walzel, ed., *Heinrich Heine: Sämtliche Werke* (Leipzig, 1910–20), 4:303.

[4] The English translation of "Attempt to Understand a Feeling," by Leslie Wilson, appears in A. Leslie Wilson, ed., *Dimension: A Reader of German Literature Since 1968* (New York: Continuum, 1981), 59–62. The German, "Versuch, ein Gefühl zu verstehen," is found in *Tintenfisch* 8 (1975): 27–30. Quotations are from *Dimension* and hereafter indicated by page numbers included in the text.

[5] Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "On Leaving America," *The New York Review of Books*, 29 February 1968, 31–32. The German version is "Offener Brief," in Joachim Schickel, ed., *Über Hans Magnus Enzensberger* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), 233–38. Quotations are from *The New York Review* and hereafter indicted by page numbers included in the text.

[6] Günter Kunert, *Der andere Planet: Ansichten von Amerika* (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1975), 32.

[7] See Karla Lydia Schultz, "A Conversation with Hans Magnus Enzensberger," *Northwest Review* 21, no. 1 (1983): 145–46.

[8] Günter Kunert, "Downtown Manhattan am Sonntagnachmittag," in *Verlangen nach Bombarzo: Reisegedichte* (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1978), 49.

[9] Günter Kunert, "Truth or Consequences," in *Reisegedichte,* 44.

[10] Günter Kunert, "Unterwegs nach El Paso," in *Reisegedichte,* 45.

[11] Jack Zipes, "Die Freiheit trägt Handschellen im Land der Freiheit: Das Bild der Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika in der Literatur der DDR," in *Amerika in der deutschen Literatur,* 345.

[12] Günter Kunert, "Das Amerikanische," in *Ziellose Umtriebe: Nachrichten vom Reisen und vom Daheimsein* (Berlin und Weimar: Aufbau-Verlag, 1979), 77.

[13] Ingeborg Bachmann, "Der gute Gott von Manhattan," in *Gedichte. Erzählungen. Hörspiel. Essays* (München: R. Piper & Co., 1964), 204. This and the preceding two passages give a most colorful, vibrant description of a new day in New York.

[14] Günter Kunert, "Downtown Manhattan am Sonntagnachmittag," in *Reisegedichte,* 49–51.