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America in the Poetic Development of Detlev von Liliencron

In Detlev von Liliencron (1844-1909) we have the unusual situation of a German poet with American ancestors. His maternal grandfather, General von Harten, was a close friend of General Washington, and his mother was born in Philadelphia. Liliencron himself spent the centennial year 1876 in America, traveling widely and acquiring a firsthand acquaintance with American culture.

To conclude from this evidence, however, that Liliencron was an admirer of America would be a serious error. Even Lenau's disillusioned reaction to the New World and his comment that the American national beverage cider rhymed with the German word *leider* seem mild beside Liliencron's bitter criticisms. Shortly after returning to Germany, Liliencron wrote to Ernst von Seckendorff that he had found New York "ein Gräuel; es ist das Leben da so schnurstracks gegen alle meine Gewohnheiten, Empfindungen, Lebensbetrachtungen, daß mir jetzt mein dortiger Aufenthalt wie eine Hölle vorkommt."¹ Even American freedom had no appeal for the young Prussian nobleman, and he satirized it in the following terms:

Wer auch nur wenige Wochen in den Vereinigten Staaten von Nordamerika gewesen ist, wird ein Gefühl der bedingungslosen Freiheit mit in sein Vaterland zurücknehmen und bis an seinen Tod daran zurückdenken.

Frei! Mach und tue, was du willst. Das heißt: stiehlt du einen Regenschirm, so wird dir unfehlbar eine Zuchthausstrafe von fünf Jahren zum mindesten zuerkannt. Stiehlt du eine Million: man vergöttert dich und setzt dir ein Denkmal.

Frei! Ich will ein Beispiel nehmen: Auf einer Fahrt mit der Eisenbahn gefällt es dir, um dein Ziel, das zwischen zwei Haltepunkten liegt, schneller zu erreichen, mit einem Sprunge den in voller Fahrt befindlichen Zug zu verlassen. Gut. Es hindert dich kein Mensch. Es ist deine Sache. Du springst und brichst vielleicht den Arm, ein Bein, den Hals—deine Sache . . .

Frei!²

The responsibility for Liliencron's negative American experience lies partly in his reasons for going to the New World. Liliencron left his homeland, not in search of freedom and adventure, but to escape from heavy debts and an unhappy love affair. He hoped first for a military career in South America, but lacked the money necessary for uniforms and equipment. In North America he traveled as far west as Texas, but was nowhere able to find a firm footing in the American society. A harrowing period in New York wrote the conclusion to his American experience, a time in which real hunger forced him to work as a pianist in a cheap restaurant in the Bowery.

An almost complete silence lies over the period from September 1875 to February 1877, when Liliencron was absent from Germany. He claimed that he had been to Africa and America,³ but if he wrote letters from those places, they have evidently not been preserved.

Because of this lack of direct evidence of Liliencron's American experience, the indirect evidence presented by his two American plays is of special biographical significance. Liliencron wrote only seven dramatic works, all between the years 1881 and 1887, and the two American plays fall in the middle of this period. *Arbeit adelt* is a short, two-act piece, which probably contains a mixture of what actually happened to Liliencron in America and what he wished might have happened.

The setting is the home of a wealthy German immigrant on Fifth Avenue in New York. Under the American name "Mr. Smith," this German-American has made his fortune in America and is known for his generosity to new arrivals. The hero is a Prussian count who has left military service and come to America, where he is known only as "John," to escape his creditors. John is clearly hungry, but so proud that only the sight of Smith's beautiful daughter Maria induces him to take the menial position of *Reitknecht*. He suggests that the position would be more acceptable if he were called "Bereiter," but Smith asserts that "Arbeit schändet nicht, Arbeit adelt,"⁴ and insists that John can have the job only as *Reitknecht*. John performs his duties faithfully and wins the favor of his employer so well that Smith writes secretly to the emperor, asking that John be reinstated as an officer and offering to pay all his debts. John and Maria fall in love, and the play ends as all prepare to celebrate their wedding and then to sail to Germany, where John will resume his military commission as Baron Hans Gyldendralle and Maria will live happily as baroness.

The play was published and has been performed a few times, but never with particular success. Though its dramatic worth is slight, *Arbeit adelt* shows the wishful thinking that characterized Liliencron not only in America, but long after his return, where he kept hoping in vain for some magical release from the burden of his debts.

Pokohontas, a dramatization of the familiar story of the Indian princess and the British officer John Smith, is a longer, more complex play, but gives less indication of the author's own life in America. The piece was never accepted for stage presentation and was published for the first time in Liliencron's collected works in 1904. The constantly

shifting dramatic focus of this play weakens its impact. The tragic story of the love of the Indian princess for the white officer, which ends with her death just as the final curtain falls, is interrupted by a tale of almost totally unrelated political intrigue. Two themes thus compete for the limelight, and neither is effectively developed.

If the importance of Liliencron's stay in America were to rest solely on these dramatic products of his American experience, it would be worth little mention. The real meaning of America is, however, a much deeper one, for the sojourn there stands just before Liliencron's emergence as a poet. The man who went to America was a popular extrovert, Friedrich von Liliencron, known to his friends as Fritz. On his return he assumed a new name, Detlev, and turned to writing poetry. In order to understand this change, it is useful to consider the sequence of events leading up to his departure.

In 1875 Friedrich von Liliencron was thirty-one years old, a dedicated Prussian officer who had been wounded in battle and decorated for bravery. His greatest pleasure was in the social affairs connected with military life, where his fine manners and musical talents combined with free-handed generosity to win for him the favor of beautiful women as well as that of his fellow officers. He constantly lived beyond his means so that the pressure from his creditors became increasingly oppressive. After a number of passing flirtations, he had in 1871 become seriously attached to a young woman of noble birth but no fortune. Helene von Bodenhausen was seventeen when they met, and she returned his affection wholeheartedly. Preparations were being made to announce their engagement, when Helene's father learned of Liliencron's financial situation and refused his permission for their marriage. Reununciation was a difficult ordeal for the young couple, but finally Liliencron tore himself away and returned to military service. He was first sent with Prussian forces to Poland, but was in Spandau when news reached him that Helene was engaged to another man. Plunging into new excesses to forget his anguish, he increased his debts to the point where it became necessary to resign from the military service, and even to flee the country to avoid his creditors.

Before leaving Germany, Liliencron was a man of action. He had written a little imitative verse as a student, but nothing that he regarded as poetry. On his return, shortly before his thirty-third birthday, an age when lyric gifts often give way to prose, Liliencron's poetic muse awoke and he began to write verses which gradually won him a recognized place among the lyric poets of Germany.

Two events made Liliencron's emigration a complete break with the past. In 1872, shortly after his final renunciation of Helene, Liliencron's mother died. He had never been close to his father, a minor government official, but his mother, of half southern blood and artistic temperament, had always been sympathetic to her generous and impractical son.⁵ Her death and the loss of Helene created an emotional vacuum in young Liliencron before he sailed for America in 1875.

This vacuum found, however, nothing in the New World to fill it. There was only an empty longing for past scenes, for disappointed

hopes, for beloved persons, all now irretrievably lost. In his fantasies Liliencron revisited scenes and persons of his old home, dwelling on them in imagination. Helene's face accompanied him everywhere; as he told her later, "Wo immer ich gewesen, seit unserem letzten Lebewohl in Köthen hat Ihr Bild mir vor der Seele gestanden."⁶ In a poem he recalled how, even in the midst of America's competitive race for wealth, he was refreshed by the appearance to his inner eye of a walk in the evening woods with Helene:

Da plötzlich
In all dem Schreien, Stoßen, Fluchen, Treiben,
Zog klar vorüber mir ein liebes Bild:
Ganz wie versteckt in Feld und Wald und Heide,
Fern von den Dörfern und den großen Straßen,
Liegt unser Haus vereinsamt und verloren,
In eines alten Gartens stiller Welt.
Die Sonne schien auf kiesbedeckte Wege,
Und in den Bäumen war ein Maienleben.
Du gingst zur Seite mir, und Hand in Hand,
So standen endlich wir am lichten Rande
Der kleinen Holzung . . .⁷

Liliencron was away from Germany for sixteen months, a period of bitter disillusionment and homesickness. "Es war alles schwarz und wüst um mich," he wrote later, "Leer und öde, ohne Ziel, ohne Freude."⁸ He returned to Germany, but his first impression was that the old world, too, had vanished. A letter to Seckendorff describes these feelings: "So bin ich denn wieder hier. Nur ein großes Grab ist mir mein ganzes bisheriges Leben. Alle meine zahlreichen Bekannten, alle jene Lieben, die ich seit 61 in Deutschland kennen lernte—sind für mich nicht mehr."⁹

It is much more difficult to assess the impact of the American experience on Liliencron's poetic awakening than it is to discover the immediate poetic inspiration for his first poems. The published correspondence gives a touching picture of the ecstasy of the returned wanderer when a formal letter of inquiry brought the welcome reply that Helene would receive her old lover again. Her engagement to his rival had been broken, and her father who had opposed her marriage to Liliencron was dead. Liliencron tells her how his fingers trembled as he opened her letter and how its happy contents drove him out into the spring world:

Dann rannte ich drei Stunden wie ein Verrückter in den Straßen. Es war alles in Sonnenlicht getaucht. Vor den Fenstern standen Frühlingsblumen. Die Sperlinge schwatzten, die Lerchen jubelten, die alten Krähen stolperten noch einmal so vergnügt durch die Luft. Die Menschen lachten. Ich kaufte bei einem Gärtner eine Levkoie, Deine Lieblingsblume. Jetzt steht sie vor mir; und süße Erinnerungen ruft sie in mir wach.¹⁰

In unpacking old military pictures, Liliencron found further poetic inspiration. To Helene he wrote:

Ich kann Dir nicht beschreiben, was ich gestern und heute gelitten habe beim Auspacken und Aufhängen meiner Bilder. Ich habe über hundert Soldaten- (Gruppen-) Photographien. Meist bin ich selbst auf allen. Die übrigen sind mir von meinen Kameraden, Unteroffizieren, Spielleuten oder Gemeinen zum Andenken geschenkt. Ich glaube, ich hatte stets große Liebe bei meinen Untergebenen. Auf die Rückseite eines Bildes schrieb ich heute; es kam mir plötzlich in den Sinn:

Durch die Heide, durch den Wald
Sind wir lustig fortgezogen—
Doch die Hörner sind verklungen,
Und die Lieder sind verhallt.¹¹

Another picture, this time a humorous photo of a military group, called forth another poem which he included in the same letter to Helene.¹² These two poems from April 1877 were considered by Liliencron his first genuine poetry. Only eight days after the letter which contained them, he wrote to Seckendorff that he was on the way to becoming a writer, and he asked his friend for "strengste Kritik."¹³

The importance of the American experience which preceded Liliencron's sudden emergence as a poet can be inferred only from indirect evidence. There are plants which cannot bear fruit unless they are first subjected to a period of freezing weather, and Liliencron's genius was perhaps of this type. It is clear that the poet himself saw the journey to America as a departure from life, a kind of death, for it took him far away from the only real world he knew. His description of America as a "Hölle" carries with it the further implication that his return was a resurrection into a new existence. Symbolic of the new beginning is the new name "Detlev" to replace the old "Friedrich."

Friedrich was a name immortalized in Prussian military history by "Friedrich der Große" of the preceding century. The source of the name Detlev is obscure, but may include an echo of the family name of the poetess Sophie Dethlef (1809-1864), whose poems in *Plattdeutsch* precede those of the better known Klaus Groth.

It should also be noted that Liliencron's visit to America was a return to the home of his ancestors, another symbolic indicator of a process preceding birth. He had seen his mother's homeland through the rosy haze of her childhood reminiscences, but what he found there were only further blows to his fortunes and hopes. When he returned to his homeland like the prodigal son and abased himself before friend and sweetheart, he found a paradise of love and acceptance which made him burst forth in grateful song.

An early poem, included among the letters to Helene, describes the poet's feelings as he departs from his homeland, and again as he returns. Entitled "Abschied und Rückkehr," it begins:

Vorbei—vorbei—die Möwe nur
Gibt mir ein trauriges Geleite,
Begleitet meine feuchte Spur—
Und trostlos irrt mein Blick ins Weite.

The second part of the poem contains many suggestions of an entrance into Paradise, where the wanderer returns to a land of perpetual spring, among whose blessings are significantly those of music and speech:

Aurikel blüht, die Schwalbe zieht,
Und auf den Dächern schwatzen Stare;
Der Orgeldreher dreht sein Lied,
Ein Frühlingswind wirrt mir die Haare.

Die Mädchen lachen Arm in Arm,
Soldaten stehen vor der Wache;
Und aus der Schule bricht ein Schwarm,
Sie lärmen lustig m e i n e Sprache.¹⁴

Many authors have developed a promising talent into a real poetic gift under the effects of a major loss, the death or estrangement of a beloved person, or exile from the familiar homeland. Longing for these lost treasures has been able to stir the depths of a potentially poetic nature to lyric expression. For Liliencron, however, while a period of total renunciation and the destruction of his fondest hopes preceded his awakening as a poet, it was not loss but rediscovery that woke his muse.

The journey to America thus played an essential, but most unusual role in Liliencron's poetic development. Traditionally America has been the *Schlaraffenland* of German poets, a dream world of marvelous opportunities. For Liliencron, in contrast, the American dream became a nightmare, from which he awoke to be a leading lyric voice in his German homeland.

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Notes

¹ Letter, 19 April 1877, *Detlev von Liliencron, Ausgewählte Briefe*, ed. Richard Dehmel (Berlin: Schuster & Loeffler, 1910), I, 69.

² Detlev von Liliencron, *Gesammelte Werke* (Berlin: Schuster & Loeffler, 1912), VIII, 73-74. Ernst L. Loewenberg, "Liliencron und Amerika," *Monatshefte*, 37 (1945), 428-36, concludes his essay with the quotation of the initial part of this passage, introduced by the statement: "Liliencron kämpfte Zeit seines Lebens für Freiheit und Unabhängigkeit des Menschen. Einen Zug dieser Freiheit hatte er in Amerika gefühlt" (p. 436). This very positive statement seems to me to contrast sharply with the clear intention of the context to satirize and condemn the kind of freedom the poet found in America.

³ Letter to Helene von Bodenhausen, 24 February 1877, *Unbegreiflich Herz, Detlev von Liliencrons Liebesbriefe an Helene von Bodenhausen*, ed. Heinrich Spiero (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1925), p. 150.

⁴ Detlev Freiherr von Liliencron, *Arbeit adelt, Genrebild in zwei Akten* (Leipzig: W. Friedrich, 1887), p. 13.

⁵ Heinrich Spiero, *Detlev von Liliencron, Sein Leben und seine Werke* (Berlin und Leipzig: Schuster & Loeffler, 1913), pp. 25-26.

⁶ Letter, 24 February 1877, *Unbegreiflich Herz*, p. 150.

⁷ Spiero, *Detlev von Liliencron*, p. 89.

⁸ Letter to Helene von Bodenhausen, 28 February 1887, *Unbegreiflich Herz*, pp. 151-53.

⁹ Letter, 19 April 1877, *Ausgewählte Briefe*, I, 69. The date "61" is the year of Liliencron's entry into Prussian military service.

¹⁰ Letter, 28 February 1877, *Unbegreiflich Herz*, p. 151.

¹¹ Letter, 11 April 1877, *Unbegreiflich Herz*, p. 154.

¹² This poem is available in two versions. In the earliest epistolary copy it consists of two verses, of four and five lines, and begins: "Wir zogen durch Schnee und Eis, durch Sonne und Regen." Later it appeared as a single verse of six lines, beginning, "Zuweilen ist es mir, als wenn ich höre:/ Die Trommeln wirbeln und den Schrei der Hörner." Cf. *Unbegreiflich Herz*, p. 156.

¹³ Letter, 19 April 1877, *Ausgewählte Briefe*, 70.

¹⁴ *Unbegreiflich Herz*, pp. 190-91.

