

‘Pioneers! O Pioneers!’ and Whitman’s Early German Translators

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Judging from the publication history of Walt Whitman’s ‘Pioneers! O Pioneers!’ in Germany, ‘the day-break call’ sounded in the poem took longer to reach and resonate with readers, writers and translators in Germany than it did in Britain. It was not published in German translation until twelve years after Whitman’s death, in 1904.¹ Though the first two German translations of Whitman’s poems, by Ferdinand Freiligrath and Adolf Strodtmann respectively, did feature a selection of war poems from *Drum-Taps*, they did not include ‘Pioneers’.² One reason why the poem may not have been of immediate interest to these earliest German translators of Whitman could be that ‘Pioneers’ was part of a cluster of poems that Whitman designated ‘Marches Now the War is Over’. Freiligrath and Strodtmann were primarily interested in presenting the German-speaking public with poems written during and about the American Civil War, as a way of introducing them to unique aspects of American history and culture. The title of the cluster and the topic of the poem, though, seem to imply an end of war and a progressive movement toward civil restoration.

Several German translators before World War I did include the poem – for instance Johannes Schlaf and Karl Federn – but it did not provoke special commentary in their introductions or in other articles they published on Whitman. The only translator of Whitman to single out ‘Pioneers’ as an exceptional poem was, ironically, an outspoken critic of socialism. A nationalist keen on reviving the strength of the German nation and people, Wilhelm Schölermann was attracted to the poem for its vigorous, militaristic incitement to ‘march’ and move forward, an impulse he saw as standing in direct contrast to the perceived degeneracy, stagnation, and moral weakness of German society at the turn of the twentieth century. He saw the poem as so important, in fact, that he placed it at the beginning of his book, *Grashalme* (‘Leaves of Grass’). In the introduction, he describes the motivation that led him to choose ‘Pioneers’ as the opening poem as follows:

The hope I have of making some of the vital energy that flows between the lines of this poetry accessible to the German reader is perhaps presumptuous; but I shall still not consider it disappointed if, maybe only after years of inner development among us, the spirit of the book has taken root among the best of our people. That our soil is receptive to such powerful seed – doubly so after a period of national indolence and political disinterestedness – and that now *the time has come for Whitman's healthy social individualism to replace the downright apoplectic socialism*, nobody with any deeper understanding can

deny. The decisive turn toward drive of personality is already, as it were, in the air here. Whether we shall recognize the cultural significance of this healing process and emerge from it truly matured, only the future can tell. As a forerunner for us, too, however, Whitman will be of valuable service to us in this time of transition. And for this reason, the song of the ‘Pioneers’ has been placed at the top of this selection. [...] The poem seems to lead directly, as if with a leap, into an air current where a deep breath must be drawn. It is a parade march in a shower of bullets to the sound of a band! A step at the double-quick into life and death. Which German musician would like to compose this march? For its fast pace demands to be set to music.³

Schölermann was an art critic from Vienna, who wrote for the *Wiener Rundschau*, among other publications, and published several works of art criticism of his own. He was interested not only in the modernity he observed in Whitman’s work but also in Austrian painters and sculptors who broke away from the then-popular Vienna Secessionist school and aimed at creating a new Austrian form of art. But, as the introduction to his translation of Whitman’s poems makes clear, his vision of the cultural change that Whitman would pioneer in Germany did not stop at the borders of Germany or Austria but included all German-speaking people. Just as some British socialists hoped that the spirit of progressive reform celebrated in ‘Pioneers’ would guide the ‘elder races’ into a better, more modern future, as Kirsten Harris explains, Schölermann championed Whitman’s poetry as way toward a rejuvenated, stronger Germany – even though he considered socialism a dead end rather than a goal.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, many Germans were seeking new directions for the nation and turned to different political and cultural movements in their hope for reform. The relatively late onset of industrialization, especially as compared to Britain, meant that the fast rise of capitalism, materialism, and economic exploitation of the working classes were still relatively recent phenomena at the time, and a sense of instability and of living in a transitional period expressed itself in a variety of attitudes. For some Germans, it was imperialism that was the most threatening tendency; for others exaggerated nationalism, socialism or communism.

In this cultural climate, it is not surprising that some writers and translators turned to Whitman’s poetry for inspiration, casting him in the role of a prophetic mystic and visionary, a ‘wound-dresser’ for the evils afflicting Germany. Some of Whitman’s early German translators themselves expressed fears that their age was one marked by moral or spiritual degeneracy in essays or introductory materials. Schlaf and Schölermann in

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particular saw in Whitman the modern man, the ‘Vollmensch’ (the full or complete human being), who promised to overcome the unwholesome separation of body and spirit perceived to underlie many of the problems of the time. In a blurring of boundaries between the poet and his work, Schlaf sees both as the antidote to decadence and spiritual exhaustion:

Who would not be swept away by these glorious lines of verse that are so plain and so deep, and that appear to us so deliciously beneficial through the power of their delectable freshness in the tired decadence of this turn of the century, with all its despondencies, its compromises, its arts and affectations! [...] Simplicity, depth and strength, this is Whitman. True, this also means simplicity to the point of [writing] flat, businesslike American prose, depth that can turn into confused mysticism, and strength that may become barbaric crudeness, a cowboy-like attitude. But this, after all, is Whitman.⁴

For Schlaf and several other early translators of Whitman, the future was closely linked with America and with this strange new American bard in particular. Indeed, in many German accounts, both positive and negative, America was often seen as the land of the future. For Schölermann, the greatest promise Whitman’s message had for the future of Germany was expressed in ‘Pioneers’. As he wrote in his introduction, he truly hoped that German readers would share his enthusiasm and interpret the poem as a rejection of past modes of thinking and misguided political reform movements. In his own way, Schölermann was hoping for a cultural awakening, perhaps even a small cultural revolution. As Ed Folsom and Gay Wilson Allen have noted, ‘from early on, Whitman has been read in other cultures as a poet of revolution, and his influence has been notably cross-cultural, as writers from one nationality export or import him with ease into another.’⁵ It is indeed remarkable to see the many different political and ideological contexts in which Whitman has been invoked, quoted, republished and translated abroad and also in his native country. Writing in 1865, one anonymous American reviewer, for instance, wrote of the poem ‘Pioneers! O Pioneers!’:

This is our American war-song, good not only for the battle-field, but for the labor-field – the present, still more than the past; for ours are not the ‘*piping* times of peace;’ our American life is on the march, filing through the passes of outgrown formalism, outflanking the hosts of slavery, gaining the mountain heights of an all-comprehending vision.⁶

As Harris observes, the militaristic imagery of the poem can be understood both literally and metaphorically, and the poem’s message can be adapted to a military (‘battle-field’) as well as a sociopolitical (‘labour-field’) context. The dynamic tone and progressive quality

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of the poem make it future-oriented and an ideal poetic vehicle for reform messages. But even though many of Whitman's poems appealed to German socialist writers and translators – especially from the first few decades of the twentieth century onward – who used Whitman's poetry and persona to rally an international following with pacifist aims, 'Pioneers' was not typically singled out as a favourite. When Max Hayek, a Social Democratic journalist and author, translated numerous poems by Whitman for the magazine *Sozialistische Monatshefte* ('Socialist Monthly Papers') from 1915 to the 1920s, before publishing a book-length translation of the poet, he chose 'The Mystic Trumpeter' as one of the earliest selections, followed by a wide variety of poems, bypassing 'Pioneers'. Gustav Landauer, a more radical advocate of social anarchism, also published German Whitman translations in periodicals before he was killed in 1919 by German soldiers, after his involvement in the failed attempt to establish a soviet republic in Bavaria after World War I. Like Hayek, his selection includes several poems with an anti-war focus such as 'Ashes of Soldiers', as well as 'The Mystic Trumpeter' and 'Years of the Modern'.⁷ Again, though, 'Pioneers' was not among the poems he chose. While some proponents of communist and socialist literature in Russia considered the poem inspiring and important enough to distribute to soldiers of the Red Army in translation, 'Pioneers' seemed to be a less obvious choice for left-leaning German translators than 'The Mystic Trumpeter'.⁸

Like translators and editors in other countries, Whitman's German translators managed to take some of the criticisms Whitman levelled at his country and apply them to their own society and literary discourse, criticizing the mediocrity, decadence or materialism they themselves perceived to be corroding their society, culture or nation. One way of looking at the way in which America – and Whitman as an American – are represented by his early German translators is to conceive of these images as 'a German-language construction of America as the locus of the Other', as Sander L. Gilman puts it.

It can be a positive Other – America as the space where the non-European world permits the freedom of the German from the social, moral, and intellectual constraints of 'Germany', before and after its political creation in 1871; it can be the negative Other – America as the topography of corruption and decay, where only the unfit live.⁹

According to this view, the 'discourse of difference' around Whitman, then, that is of differences between German culture and American culture, European literature and American literature, is really 'the discourse of who the Germans believe themselves not to

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19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 9 (2009) www.19.bbk.ac.uk

be: when America is good, it is because German self-representation is bad; when America is bad, it defines the positive nature of the fantasy of the German'.¹⁰ Though we should not, of course, view Whitman as merely a symbolic one-to-one substitution for an imagined 'America' in the prefaces and essays of his German translators, the poet and the persona he created for himself through his poetry and other writings did, to some degree, come to embody the abstract image of America that each translator had. In Schölermann's case, Whitman's poetry, and 'Pioneers' in particular, presented an America and a people that possessed traits he found lacking in his German contemporaries. Similar to Ernest Rhys, he saw the poem as a vision of what his country could aspire to: health, vigour, and youthfulness. Unlike James William Wallace, however, Schölermann believed socialism to be part of the problem rather than the solution.

Endnotes

¹ That year both Karl Federn and Wilhelm Schölermann published books bearing the title *Grashalme* ('Leaves of Grass') containing the poem in German.

² For the purposes of this essay, I understand a German translation to be defined linguistically rather than by the nationality of the translator or the initial place of publication, though all of the works I consider did circulate in print in Germany. The following list features all important German translations of poems by Whitman before 1920: Ferdinand Freiligrath, 'Walt Whitman', *Augsburger Allgemeine Zeitung* (12 June 1868) [10 poems from *Drum-Taps*]; Adolf Strodtmann, 'Whitman, Walt. Gedichte', in *Amerikanische Anthologie*, ed. by Adolf Strodtmann (1870); Karl Knortz and Thomas Rolleston, *Grashalme. Gedichte* (1889); Karl Federn, *Grashalme. Eine Auswahl* (1904); Wilhelm Schölermann, *Grashalme* (1904); Johannes Schlaf, *Grashalme* (1907); Franz Blei, *Hymnen für die Erde* (1914); Gustav Landauer, 'Gedichte von Traum und Tod', 'Krieg. 10 Gedichte' (1915) [appeared in periodicals]; Max Hayek, [over thirty poems that appeared in *Sozialistische Monatshefte*, from 1915 onward]. For more information on the translators and their translations, consult Walter Grünzweig, *Constructing the German Walt Whitman* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1995).

³ Wilhelm Schölermann, 'Zur Einführung,' in *Grashalme*, trans. Wilhelm Schölermann (Leipzig: Diederichs, 1904), p. x. Emphasis my own. The translation from the German is my own.

⁴ Schlaf, p. 8.

⁵ Gay Wilson Allen and Ed Folsom (eds.). *Walt Whitman and the World* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1995), p. 4.

⁶ [Anonymous]. 'Drum Taps – Walt Whitman', *Watson's Weekly Art Journal* (4 November 1865), 34-5.

⁷ See Gustav Landauer, 'Walt Whitman: Gedichte von Traum und Tat', *Der Aufbruch: Monatsblätter aus der Jugendbewegung* (August/September 1915), 25-31. *Aufbruch* was a journal with an explicit anti-war agenda edited by Ernst Joël and published in Jena.

⁸ See, for instance, the four-page pamphlet *Pionery* ('Pioneers'), which features a translation of Whitman's poem and several striking woodcut images: <<http://whitmanarchive.org/published/foreign/russian/pionery/text.html>> [accessed 8 October 2009]. A thousand copies of the pamphlet were published in Petrograd in 1918. Walter Grünzweig speculates that the main reason why Hayek, for example, was drawn to 'The Mystic Trumpeter' rather than war poetry from *Drum Taps* was that it 'permitted an integration of the (subjectively) negative experience of the war into an (overall) positive framework'. *Constructing the German Walt Whitman*, p. 60.

⁹ Sander L. Gilman, 'Introduction' to Dan Diner, *America in the Eyes of the Germans: An Essay on Anti-Americanism*, trans. Allison Brown (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1993), pp. xiii-xiv.

¹⁰ Gilman, p. xvii.