

Constructing the German Walt Whitman by Walter Grünzweig. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994. 274 pp. \$22.95 cloth. ISBN: 0-87745-481-7. \$12.95 paper.

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Since it has become a commonplace that the Left is dead and that anything caught in the path of capitalism will be ground down and reconstituted into something dreadful, radical intellectual types might as well stop worrying and do something fun for a change. They might, for example, put their feet up and read poetry. A good place to start might be with, say, Walt Whitman or Walter Grünzweig's recent book dealing with the "good gray poet."

Grünzweig indicates that in Germany, especially between 1890 and 1933, Walt Whitman's poetry was a vital element in the realm of culture, literature, and politics. This was especially so amongst people imbued with the spirit of democracy and progressive social change amidst the fragmentation and dehumanization of modernity. The "task of the book" according to the author, "...is not to discover Whitman's ontological center--his 'whatness'--but rather to analyze how the various constructions of Whitman function in a German and intercultural context" (p.4). Toward this end, Grünzweig traces the reception of Whitman through various artistic and ideological movements and seeks to understand Whitman's *pathos* and how it made such an impact upon Germans, broadly conceived. The book at hand offers chapters devoted to uncovering Whitman's reception and impact amongst naturalists, expressionists, Marxists, Anarchists, Right-wing extremists and fascists, homosexuals, and students. Grünzweig divides the book into four broad sections: translations, creative reception, politics, and sexual politics.

Reflecting my own priorities, the portions of the book that most firmly held my attention were those dealing with the various translations of Whitman and the way his poetry was used by a multiplicity of political and intellectual camps to legitimate and shape their worldviews and paths of action. One learns, for example, that the first Germanic translator of Whitman was Ferdinand Freiligrath, the one-time friend of Marx and Engels.

Freiligrath, a poet, revolutionary, and bank employee during exile, detected in Whitman a new radical and democratic impulse capable of breathing life into the ranks of defeated European revolutionaries. Like many Europeans, Freiligrath possessed an enthusiasm for America and its seemingly infinite horizons. The efforts of later translators shared Freiligrath's enthusiasm for Whitman and felt his literary *persona* to be an inspirational wellspring. They were animated by Whitman's depiction of a new, modern *ethos* and his literary creation of a qualitatively new type of human being.

Grünzweig reveals that many, perhaps most, of Whitman's translators were driven by a desire for radical change rooted in a democratic ethic. Hence, it comes as no surprise that Whitman was appropriated almost exclusively amongst radical Leftists. Karl Knortz, Thomas William Rolleston, Gustav Landauer, and Hans Reisiger were each open to the character-building or educational aspect in Whitman's poetry. In chapter six, Grünzweig highlights how Landauer recognized Whitman's educational and emancipatory dimensions.

What was important to [Landauer] in Whitman was the fact "that human beings carry the whole world in their Self, in their spirituality, that the world is but an infinite wealth of microcosms..." Landauer's main objective was the liberation of this "Self"--and it was spirituality which he considered Whitman's most important contribution toward a transformation of society (p.53).

The affinities between Whitman, Landauer, and the neo-Marxists of the late 20s through mid 30s are obvious especially when one thinks of the attempts of Reich, Horkheimer, and Fromm to confront and grasp authoritarianism at the level of "character structure" or class *ethos*.

Grünzweig discusses, briefly, the intersection of Whitman and the Marxists in Germany. However, this chapter, like a couple of chapters, is thin on detail and falls just short of name-dropping. What is lacking at times is the thick, historical web of connections and interpenetrations amongst many of the figures making appearances in this book. For example, readers not familiar with left-wing politics in Germany during the latter part of the 19th and early 20th centuries will know nothing of Hermann Bahr, Clara Zetkin, and Gustav Landauer. However, they, and others mentioned by Grünzweig, are too important to be relegated to, in some cases, a paragraph or sentence--Landauer, however, has his own chapter.

Consequently, good opportunities are missed by the author and one is left with some questions. It might have been mentioned, for example, that Hermann Bahr and Paul Ernst, the second figure not mentioned by the author, were engaged in a bitter debate beginning in

1890 over orthodox, materialist explanations of art and the influence of the mode of production in determining artistic forms. As Stanley Pierson shows in *Marxist Intellectuals and the Working-Class Mentality in Germany, 1887-1912*, Ernst emphasized the primacy of "feelings" and "inner psychological drives" over "outer material circumstances." This debate spilled over by 1892 and Landauer was drawn into it. As Pierson says, "Ernst vigorously defended the special claims of art when Gustav Landauer...dismissed literary activity as irrelevant to the class struggle" (Pierson, p.55). So, Landauer went from dismissing literary activity in 1892-93 to enthusiastically translating Whitman in 1916? Did this shift involve a change of heart on the part of Landauer? Why did Whitman become so important to him after an initial hostility or indifference toward the revolutionary and emancipatory potential of literature?

Another important historical connection that might have been raised by Grünzweig was the influence of European thinking on Whitman, especially that of Hegel and, by extension, the St. Louis Hegelians. The author only concerns himself with Whitman's reception amongst German-speaking people but the fact that continental thought played a part in Whitman's formation might be an important consideration. Pochmann, in *New England Transcendentalism and St. Louis Hegelianism* indicates that Whitman stood out among his contemporary American writers and philosophizers due to his conviction that Hegel's philosophy was the only one that truly resonated with American experiences of the time (Pochmann, p.122). Pochmann may have overstated his case but it is nonetheless true that Whitman did exhibit an uncanny resemblance to some important currents of Germanic thought.

The principle members of the St. Louis Hegelians were Henry Conrad Brokmeyer, William Torrey Harris, and Denton Jacques Snider. Of the three, Brokmeyer was the one most influenced by Hegelian philosophy. Brokmeyer was a German Jewish refugee who came to America in 1844. He spent some time as a student at Georgetown University and at Brown University. Originally influenced by Emerson and the transcendentalism of New England, he eventually "transcended transcendentalism" and the "Romantic Kantianism" of Emerson (Pochmann, pp.12-13).

Harris was a "pupil" of Brokmeyer's after leaving Yale University and later conspired with him in organizing the Hegelian movement. Harris, while employed as the superintendent of the St. Louis public school system, was the editor of the group's periodical, the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* that ran from 1867 to 1888. Harris also played a significant role in the Concord School of Philosophy and later served as the U.S. commissioner of education.

Whitman had personal contacts with this group in St. Louis. For example, on November 23, 1879 Whitman wrote from St. Louis to a friend that "This is quite a place for the most toploftical Hegelian transcendentalists, a small knot but smart--the principle of them, W. T. Harris, editor of *Speculative Philosophy*, has been often to see me, has been very kind, & I like him much..." Elsewhere in Whitman's correspondence, he indicated that Harris supplied him with copies of the *Journal* and sent him "memoranda" from the Concord School. For Whitman's part, he indicated that "I have looked over all, & thoroughly read a great part..." The point is that Whitman did not exist in a vacuum. He was, despite what many commentators have maintained, heavily influenced by Germanic thought and American transpositions of continental philosophy.

David Reynolds, in his recent and monumental study *Walt Whitman's America*, claims that one of the books that Whitman loved was an anthology called *Prose Writers of Germany* edited by Henry Hedge. I familiarized myself with this book while rereading *Leaves of Grass*. Reynolds is correct, I think; anyone who has immersed themselves in Lessing, Goethe, Schiller, Hegel, etc., inevitably raises an eyebrow when reading *Leaves*. Among German thinkers, Hegel establishes a resonant field that comes the closest to intersecting with Whitman. Those familiar with Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* will find a family resemblance between the minor dialectics of the great philosopher and Whitman. Both books could be characterized, somewhat one-sidedly, by their continuous movement over the particular, the embrace of the concrete, the dissolution of lifeless universals, and the striving toward the ensemble or totality of human life.

Grünzweig points out, correctly, that Whitman was not understood well in America (p.149) but that he was elevated to a near god-like stature when uttered in the same breath as Goethe. And this comparison was made by none other than Thomas Mann (p.65). Perhaps the European influence on Whitman's worldview could explain, partially, the warm reception in Germanic culture? But of course, many Whitman experts downplay the European aspect of Whitman's poetry. It is tempting for all scholars to valorize their academic and disciplinary capital by bathing their subject matter in the charismatic waters of exceptionality and novelty.

In his conclusion, Grünzweig draws out the facets of Whitman's writings that he feels to be ultimately decisive: Whitman provided a new way for people to talk about the modern world; he demonstrated a way in which people could think and talk holistically about the fragmentation

and decentering effects of modernity; he articulated an ideal of democracy in such a manner as to make it amenable to mass incorporation; and, finally Whitman gave us a poetic and artistic way of dissolving nationalism (p.206). Whitman did all this, still does it, I think, and these are significant achievements worthy of scrutiny. Grünzweig leaves us by saying that Whitman and his literary *persona* embodied a "subversive (hidden) quality [in] his modernity" and that, and this is really important, he "...could become a particularly effective agent for change" (p.205). Maybe he is correct; it would be nice to think so.

Perhaps taking a "break" by reading Whitman's poetry and the book under review could turn into a moment for self-reflection or, as Hegel would say, a "reversal of consciousness" by providing alternative ways of thinking and talking about history, society, progressive social reconstruction, and the place of art, literature, and poetry *within* our attempts to theorize society--I remember Walter Kaufmann's assertion in his Goethe book that "Those who would discover the mind cannot afford to ignore poetry and art." The claim that we should take literature and poetry seriously in (and into) our scholarship and practice may strike mainstream sociologists as somewhat absurd or unscientific. However, it appears that the vast majority of people are immune from things like "facts", the "objective truth", and sociology professors.

People are emotional beings before they are rational actors. If the task of leading spirit beyond itself can not be accomplished by arcane journal articles then perhaps the elements necessary for the negation of natural consciousness may be woven into the medium of literature and poetry. At least literature and poetry stands a substantially greater chance of being read and grasped by real people than does the latest offering from your average sociology professor. Adorno had this in mind when he wrote the last sentence of *The Authoritarian Personality*: "we need not suppose that appeal to emotion belongs to those who strive in the direction of fascism, while democratic propaganda must limit itself to reason and restraint. If fear and destructiveness are the major emotional sources of fascism, *eros* belongs mainly to democracy." Similarly, Schiller stated that "the way to the head must be opened through the heart."

If critical social inquiry requires anything these days, it is in confronting the necessity and challenges of cultivating a critical *ethos* amongst the children, women, and men who each day experience the contradictions and ambivalence of modern life but who are unable to penetrate its logic and collectively articulate their concerns and desires. Anyone taking seriously the task of society-wide, ethical regeneration in the spirit of radical, humanistic democracy will feel automatically attracted to *Leaves of Grass* and to the book under review. Significantly, Grünzweig's

book, in sharp contrast to the stuff that seeps out of contemporary English departments and cultural studies programs, is interesting, unpretentious, and usefully points us in many directions.