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## From the Inside Looking Out, Or, Notes from the Land-of-Eden-Corporation

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Panel: America Abroad

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**Matthias Goeritz**

**From the Inside Looking Out  
Or  
Notes from the Land-of-Eden-Corporation**

My beloved New York times, “Auntie Times” in the diction of another German writer, Uwe Johnson, who has lived in New York for some time, is the consciousness of the City. Johnson’s 2000 page novel “Anniversaries – From the Life of Gesine Cresspahl” (Harcourt Brace, check it out), is one of the yet to be discovered masterpieces of 20<sup>th</sup> century literature. Johnson presents a century of German history and also gives us one of the most beautiful homages to “The City”, as New Yorkers refer to it, ever written by an outsider.

Johnson’s narrating heroine Gesine – Gesine is raised and gets schooled in Jerichow in Northeastern Germany, not far from where I was born (at least by American Standards). You can hear the trumpets of the biblical and the mythical storytelling of his great Predecessor, William Faulkner. After Gesine loses her mother - who commits suicide in 1938 because she couldn’t cope with the Nazi Regime, and her father Heinrich Cresspahl, a master carpenter and member of the German socialist Party (SPD), disappears in a Soviet concentration camp in 1945 - Gesine is brought up by the displaced Abs family -- Jakob Abs, who is a railway dispatcher, and his mother Marie.

Gesine falls in love with Jakob and eventually emigrates to West Germany, where she conceives a child by Jakob. But before they can marry, Jakob (who isn’t happy in the capitalist West) gets killed in a suspicious accident after he returns to the Stalinist GDR.

Gesine, working for NATO, feels that she has to -- yet another time -- leave her country, as doesn’t feel at home in the West either.

She moves to New York, where she works for a bank as a specialist for development in Eastern Europe, especially Czechoslovakia which was then, in 68, during the so-called period of “Prague Spring” the great hope for a socialist form of democracy.

We all know how it ended....(though I was tempted to write: ends)

Anniversaries are those dates of personal and collective memory you cannot escape. You can ignore them, but there is no way to forget. They form our lives, if we want them to or not. To study the great gray bundle of the New York Times, diary of the day, gives the sense of the presence of someone, a collective entity to whom one may listen – like an aunt.

New York is a mythical place for many Germans, not only writers. In some ways that sentiment resonated early in the works of Goethe -- “Amerika, you are better off,” he wrote in a famous little poem from 1827. Kafka, in his first novel Amerika, continued a utopian approach to the West. One could argue that Amerika, and especially the multilingual, multicultural city of New York, the only true world capital, replaced the previous German longing for the earthly Eden of centuries before: Italy.

The grand tour was always leading to Italy – and not only in literature.

Among my generation, you'll find many Germans who lived, studied or worked in New York for at least a couple of years. What fascinates us, I believe, is the urban energy New York provides, and what you become part of immediately once you are no longer a tourist. You better hit the streets "with your heart in your pocket \ it is POEMS by ..." Frank O'Hara.

Or, you turn to the next thrift shop in order to find what you can wear clubbing that night, getting compliments on the street, feeling the urban fabric really close to you, if that pulls a certain string of grandeur mixed with street talk like: Hey man, nice suit you're wearing!

New York invites those who are restless, people in passage, people like Frank O'Hara, Gesine Cresspahl and me. As if Manhattan were just a moored ship for immigrants, who do not want to settle down permanently – even if they might stay forever. This permanent state of Transit makes New York the metaphysical home of the transcendental homeless. At least it worked that way for me.

I was living on the Lower East Side, still Noho – north of Houston - though, on 2<sup>nd</sup> street between 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue and Avenue A, for three years, teaching at a liberal arts college, at Bard College, just an hour upstate.

Anniversaries can be a cruel and crucial thing, as we all know today. There's nothing new about that though. There were wars, there was day in of Hitler's empowerment, the "Machtergreifung"; the day the first atomic bomb fell on Hiroshima; and, Kennedy's Assassination. There were more. More trauma to remember, circling its loops through our minds, like those planes on the screen.

9.11 was a watershed, the first in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, not only for the United States but also for many people in the world. The bruises on New York's Psyche are still palpable.

It's not a eulogy though. We just seem to remember catastrophic moments better, because they make us perceive life as fragile and, unfortunate human truth, limited. But without that fragility we wouldn't be human. And there are other Anniversaries, good ones: The day in 1989, when the wall that separated Europe – not only Germany – fell and ended the cold war. Armstrong's first walk on the moon. Today is the Chinese Feast of the Harvest Moon, and if you think about someone you love, you will be closer to him than ever. The Famous German Philosopher Theodor W. Adorno ("there is no right life in the false life") was born, and I was born too on September 11<sup>th</sup> in northern Germany, a region of cold marshes close to the sea where people are thought not to talk at all for days, and the beer tastes bitter as the scream of a seagull. I spent my childhood in a small municipality on the countryside where my father held the mayor's office. I was traveling all my life, sitting in the back of my father's car, going all over Europe. Once I was on my own, which came for me rather early in life, I moved to Hamburg, where I still officially live today, one of the richest cities in Europe, a fabulous port, formerly famous for its odd combination of the St. Pauli nightlife and the stiff manners of Thomas Mann- like businessmen.

I couldn't stand it for long. I had to go. Since 1994 I have been on the road. I've lived abroad half of my adult life, if that's what it is. Living in Moscow and Paris, then in Chicago and New York, I started writing in a more serious way. Living in a foreign language both alienated and sharpened the perception of my own. I was thrust into the life of foreign cities, and into a language that was barely known to me up to that point. The tension between the discovery of languages and cities has become one of the functioning principles of my poetry.

In 1997 I lived in Chicago. It was my first time in the US, and it triggered a still lasting love affair with American Poetry, Baseball, Landscape and Urbanity. Apart from holding readings, I worked with several American and German authors from different backgrounds on a book dealing with the perception of the urban sphere.

In his novel “Anniversaries” Uwe Johnson was trying to follow the intertwining collective and personal memories. He was able to tell us stories about the darkest times in history, the Nazi regime, he was able to show how people reacted under fascistic and communistic regimes, what options they had, how they failed. He told the story of the failure of those grand narratives – a humane socialist society in East Germany and in Czechoslovakia, the failure of the American version of capitalism, which does not automatically lead to Eden.

He did it by reminding us that telling a story is an act that requires responsibility, historical truth and has moral implications. To do Poetic Justice to Anniversaries is a difficult duty for any author, and we are all still too close to what happened two years ago. But remember what the politicians did right away: how hard they tried to close the wound of the tragedy by “bringing them to justice”, “hunting them down”. One of my neighbors upstate planted a hand painted billboard in his garden on September 12<sup>th</sup>: “Somebody must pay for hurting the USA.”

Besides the bad rhyming: an open society needs to cope with open wounds without taking an eye for another.

All the beauty of Amerika was that it was offering opportunities, openness, space. Kafka knew that, Goethe knew that. And the daughter of Uwe Johnson’s heroine Gesine, in spite of all bad Anniversaries – still lives in New York, I bet.