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Perikopendichtung After Opitz

W. G. Marigold

An amazing amount of the extant poetry of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is in fact versified Scripture. A glance at the bibliographies of Wackernagel, Maltzahn, Fischer/Tümpel, or Faber du Faur¹ reveals numerous rhymed versions of the Song of Solomon, various portions of the Old Testament (Nicolaus Herman's *Historien von der Sündfludt*, Wittenberg, 1562, for example), and above all rhymed versions of the Psalter and of the prescribed Gospel and Epistle readings. For the moment we shall disregard the innumerable poems which were inspired by specific portions of the Bible but which are not actually versifications.

While poetry of this type goes back to the early Middle Ages—particularly in the case of the Psalms—complete rhymed psalters and complete cycles of *Evangelien-oder Epistelgedichte* are undoubtedly a by-product of the Reformation. Renate Gerling rightly says, "Diese Neuorientierung (nach der Reformation) führte im Bereich der Dichtung dazu, dass im 16. Jahrhundert die protestantische geistliche Lyrik auf weite Strecken zur Bibelparaphrase wurde."² The statement is only slightly less true of the seventeenth century, at least in terms of volume. The tradition of verse translations, particularly of the Psalter, is not as exclusively Protestant as Gerling and others would imply, for many Catholic dioceses, possibly as a sop to latent Protestant tendencies, permitted or even encouraged the introduction of German hymns.³ There are many Catholic rhymed Psalters, beginning with Johann Leisentritt's *Gesangbuch* of 1567. For reasons connected with the structure of the mass, rhymed versions of the Epistles and Gospels were less attractive to Catholic hymn writers, and it is not until the middle of the seventeenth century that we find a Catholic version. It should perhaps be noted that we are tacitly assuming that the complete cycles of psalms, epistles or gospels were written as hymns. The rhymed psalms were undoubtedly so used, both in church and in the home. Whether the epistles and gospels were so widely used is a debatable point, although the survival of fairly numerous specimens in various *Gesangbücher* until the end of the eighteenth century indicates that they were more popular than we can readily imagine today. We do know that at least one bishop, Johann Philipp von Schönborn, encouraged by pastoral instructions (1656, 1661) the use of German *Perikopendichtung*, including his own.

In a relatively short article it is not possible to discuss the important question of the literary value of poetry which is actually versified Scripture. Obviously, many of the psalms lend themselves readily to poetic treatment. Equally obviously, many do not, and it is safe to say that no complete rhymed Psalter is a literary masterpiece. The really memorable psalm poetry is found in paraphrases or in rhymed versions of suitably selected psalms—one thinks of the *Busspsalmen* of Fleming or some of

the sonnets of Gryphius. The epistles and gospels are much less tractable. Hugo Max says, "Von allen Umschreibungen oder Übersetzungen biblischer Bücher im 17. Jahrhundert sind die Versifizierungen der im kirchlichen Gottesdienst gebräuchlichen Perikopen am zweckhaftesten und trotz ihrer formalen Virtuosität am literaturfernensten,"⁴ and we can only agree. It is more than questionable whether it is possible to turn most of the prescribed readings into really notable poetry. It is in fact surprising that a few poets managed to produce cycles of more than average quality that can retain the interest of the reader, who, moreover, often reads the whole cycle at once, something that was of course never intended. We should constantly remind ourselves that the versifications were written as hymns and that their authors regarded poetic qualities as secondary, if indeed they thought of them at all.

Before considering two examples a little more closely, it is necessary to examine briefly the history of rhymed treatments of the epistles and gospels.⁵ Despite the numerous entries in the standard bibliographies, our knowledge is surprisingly limited. None of the bibliographies is even approximately complete, particularly for Catholic works, and many of the titles listed in older works are almost impossible to locate.⁶ Furthermore, the titles are often misleading. Probably sixty percent of the works listed are actually not rhymed versions at all, but rather short edifying reflections on the scriptural passages. Midway between this type and versified translation is the cycle that is without question the high point of *Perikopendichtung* (using the word in a wider sense) in the baroque period—the *Sonn- und Feiertagssonnette* of Andreas Gryphius (1639).

The earliest known *Evangeliengedichte* are by Nicolaus Wolwerb (Leipzig, 1540). These are in simple *Knittelvers*, follow Luther's Bible as closely as possible, and were, according to the introduction, intended for use in the home. A much better version is that of Nicolaus Herman (Wittenberg, 1560). His *Sontagsevangelia* were intended primarily for use in the family circle, though he says that anyone who wishes to use them in the church service may do so "auff sein Ebentheuer."

Johann Posthlius' *Sonntagsevangelien* appeared posthumously in 1597 (Amberg). As far as can be determined, Posthlius was the first writer to adapt either epistles or gospels to the melodies of the Genevan Psalter. Furthermore his work was specifically intended for liturgical use. By his own account Opitz took Posthlius' work as the model for his own *Episteln der Sontage und fürnemsten Feste* (first edition Breslau, 1624 or 1627/28), the first rhymed German version of the epistles that has come to my attention. Opitz' work was commissioned by the Duke of Liegnitz. It was certainly no labor of love and is neither good Opitz nor good hymn-writing. Opitz' authority made the work important and probably stimulated others to follow his example, though in actual fact later cycles are not too numerous.

By far the best-known writer of *Perikopendichtung* after Opitz is Johann Heermann. He was born in Rauten (Niederschlesien) in 1585, studied in various Silesian towns, including Breslau and Brieg, and attended briefly the University of Strassburg. After 1611 he remained in Köben as pastor until his death in 1647. Heermann wrote both German and Latin poetry and was crowned poet by Emperor Rudolf II, but his

fame rests entirely on his hymns, many of which are still in use. Heermann used the gospels very frequently and three cycles of brief meditative poems based on them were published before the rhymed "Umdichtungen," *Sontags- und Fest-Evangelia durchs gantze Jahr*, appeared in Leipzig in 1636. There were numerous further editions until far into the eighteenth century. The best discussion of them as poetry is to be found in the long essay on Heermann in Schröder's *Dichter und Dichtung der Kirche* (Berlin, 1936) which, unfortunately, did not become widely known.

Carl Hitzeroth correctly says of Heermann, "In erster Linie ist er Pfarrer. Die dichterische Tätigkeit ist ihm eine wertvolle Ergänzung seines Berufes."⁷ In the Vorrede to the edition of 1636 Heermann says, "Die Texte der heiligen Schrift sind zwar an sich selber die allerlieblichste Musik, die uns Trost und Leben in Todesnoth giebet . . . wann aber eine süsse und sehnliche Weise darzu kömpt, wie denn eine gute Melodey auch Gottes schön Geschöpf und Gabe ist, da bekömpft der Gesang eine neue Kraft und gehet tieffer zu Hertzen."⁸ This can be taken as characteristic of Heermann's approach. It may be said that he suggests using well-known chorales.

Despite the fact that Heermann reworked some of his poems after 1630, when he apparently became acquainted with Opitz' *Buch von der teutschen Poeterey*, it cannot be said that there is much sign of Opitz' influence. The only poet to whom Heermann is deeply indebted is Nicolaus Herman. Some poems are not much more than polished and linguistically more sophisticated versions of Nicolaus Herman's versions. Johann Heermann uses almost exclusively eight-syllable lines, usually in four or six-line stanzas. The most frequent rhyme schemes are AABB, AABCCB and AABBC. There is no regular alternation of masculine and feminine lines. Heermann frequently uses dubious rhymes (*Kost-Lust*, for example) and even more frequently rhymes that are only valid in the Silesian dialect (*noth-Gott* or *davon-Lohn*, for example). He often adds or takes away letters to save the rhythm—it is in this respect that he transgresses most frequently against Opitz' rules. There is very little trace of baroque imagery or rhetoric. On the contrary, the greatest virtue of the poems is the "homely," anecdotal approach. As an example of Heermann's work I quote the opening stanzas of the poem for Easter Monday (based on Luke 24, 36-48).⁹

1. Am Ostertag, umb Vesperzeit,
Spazierten aus voll Traurigkeit
Gen Emmahus der Jünger zween,
Ihr Angst und Elend auszugehn.
2. Sie fingen da von Jesu an,
Was ihm das Jüden Volk gethan,
Wie er den Creutz-Todt unverschuldt
Erlitten hette mit Gedult.
3. Bald kam der Herr doch unerkannt
Als einer, der zeucht über Land.
Wonaus? sprach Er, wonaus? Glück zu!
Gott geb euch Frewde, Fried und Ruh.
4. Was ist die Rede, die jhr führt?
Und seydt so trawrig, wie man spürt?

Cleophas sprach: Bistu allein,
Der Fremdling, dem nichts kund mag seyn?
5. Er fragte: Welches? Jener sprach:
Die grosse Marter, Qual und Schmach,
Die Jesus in der heiligen Stadt
Von Jüden ausgestanden hat.

The next notable version of the gospels to appear after Heermann's is the *Catholische Sonn- und Feyertägliche Evangelia* (Würzburg, 1653) by Johann Philipp von Schönborn, Elector-archbishop of Mainz and Prince-bishop of Würzburg. A second edition (Würzburg, 1656) includes the epistles as well. There is no author's name on the title-page, but the authorship of Johann Philipp is easily established by the autograph drafts and corrections and by the extensive correspondence dealing with the writing, correction, and printing of the work. This material is preserved in the Schönborn Archives, Wiesentheid, Unterfranken.¹⁰ Johann Philipp was the author of several other religious works, notably the rhymed Psalter (Frankfurt/Mainz, 1658), and was apparently the only 17th century writer to write a complete set of *Perikopendichtung*; i.e., psalms, gospels, and epistles.¹¹

Johann Philipp's *Evangelia* is the first known Catholic version and it had few successors. Johann Philipp had hopes of bringing Frankfurt am Main back to the Church, was interested in a reconciliation between Catholics and Protestants, and was prepared to make notable concessions, including the granting of communion in both forms.¹² Leibniz' interest in church union probably began during his years in the service of Johann Phillip in Mainz.¹³ Many converts were active in Mainz, and the composer of the melodies for the gospels, Philipp Friedrich Buchner, was a former Lutheran cantor. Johann Philipp certainly wrote both the *Perikopen*-poems and his rhymed psalms for church use, as can be proved by the pastoral instructions of 1656 and 1661. Günter Müller's statement, "Der katholische Gemeindegesang ist für die Wirklichkeit des Gottesdienstes, d.h. für den Vollzug des Messopfers völlig irrelevant... Der Gemeindegesang ist hier Hilfs-oder Ausdrucksmittel für die Laienschaft aber nie Konstituens der gottesdienstlichen Opferhandlung"¹⁴ is of course technically correct, but in reality Johann Philipp and others at the time were prepared to allow the German hymn an important place in the service, and Müller badly underestimates the importance of the German Catholic hymn. It is not improbable that the Elector deliberately took over a supposedly "Protestant" form, regarding it as an instrument of reconciliation. At least one prominent Catholic theologian and musician, the late Professor Adam Gottron of Mainz, felt that the composer Buchner deliberately and with Johann Philipp's approval made use of a few Protestant melodies.¹⁵

Since Johann Philipp was a dilettante whose poetry was written to fulfill a specific purpose, it seems reasonable to assume that he had a model for his poems. Very few poets of the day, even major ones, undertook such a work without a model. Nevertheless, none has as yet been found. The presence of a *Lehrstück* and a prose prayer with each selection reminds us of Johann Heermann, but it is not likely that a Catholic prelate would have known Heermann's work and there are no

obvious similarities. Only about half of the poems of Johann Philipp are based on the passages used by Heermann. This is not entirely a difference between Catholic and Protestant liturgy, but is partly the result of the peculiarities of the Mainz liturgy which retained its old “non-Roman” form until 1698. We know from the correspondence in the Wiesentheid archives¹⁶ that the *Lehrstücke* and prayers were largely the work of Conrad Breunig, rector of the Jesuit College in Aschaffenburg, and of Philipp Erwein, the Elector’s brother. Johann Philipp knew Opitz’ rhymed psalms—in a letter in Wiesentheid he thanks Philipp Erwein for sending him a copy—and he may well have known Opitz’ *Episteln*, but his own poems show little or no sign of any influence. A letter of 1649 mentions *Evangelia* printed in Venice, but an extensive search in various catalogs and bibliographical works has failed to locate any corresponding publication.¹⁷ The only Italian rhymed cycle appeared in 1658, five years after the publication of Johann Philipp’s work. For the present we may assume that Johann Philipp had a general acquaintance with *Perikopendichtung*, possibly from *Gesangbücher*, virtually all of which contain at least a few gospel or epistle poems.

Johann Philipp is a great deal less “folksy” than Heermann. His poems are in general loftier in tone. While they are usually slightly longer than Heermann’s versions, the length results from lack of compression rather than from anecdotal expansion. Johann Philipp uses few rhetorical devices and convinces more by sincerity and simplicity than by art. While Heermann is more entertaining to read—just because of his anecdotal tone—it can reasonably be argued that Johann Philipp writes more convincing hymns. His *Evangelia* are notable for the variety of stanza forms and line lengths, a variety made possible by the fact that Bucher wrote or adapted melodies specifically for those texts. The norm is an eight-syllable line, but everything from five to sixteen-syllable lines can be found. The rhymes are not startling. However, they are much purer than Heermann’s. Beyond the usual slightly impure rhymes of the type *Ehre-höre*, we find only one or two rhymes—*schweige-Leiche*, for example—to remind us of the author’s native dialect.

As an example of the poems we may take the lesson for the sixth Sunday after Epiphany, based on Matthew 13.¹⁸

1. Jesus sprach: Das Himmelreich/
Ist eim Senfften-körnlein gleich/
So einer nahm zu sähen/
Damit es auff sölt gehen;
So zwar das kleinst am sahmen ist;
Wans wäxt/ vnd in ein stengel schist/
So thut es sich erweiteren
An gröss vor allen kreütern.
2. Vnd wäxt so gross vnd so geraum/
Biss dass es endlich eimem Baum
An grösse zu vergleichen;
Dass vnder seinen zweichen
Der Vögel leichte schar vnd hauff

- Sich kan gar füglich halten auff/
Vnd sich darinn bequehmen/
Vnd seine wohnung nehmen.
3. Er sagt darbey: Es ist auch gleich/
Eim Sawer—deig das Himmelreich/
Die ein erfahrnes Weibe
Mit etwas meel zerreibe;
Vnd vnder dreyen sester meel
Vermenget/ biss es ohne fehl
Sich gantz vnd gar ersewert
Vnd sein geschmack erneuert.
4. Vnd Jesus redt mit allem fleiss
Nur mit den Scharen gleichnuss weiss/
Dass er erfüllt die reden/
So stehen in Propheten:
In gleichnuss weiss/ da will ich nun
Den Mund beginnen auffzuthun/
Geheimnuss ausszusprechen/
Von anfang anzurechen.

It is remarkable how little similarity there often is even when the two poets are using the same passage. To illustrate this, we need only look at a typical case. Both Heermann and Johann Philipp use John 2, 1-11, the story of the marriage at Cana, for the second Sunday after Epiphany.¹⁹

Johann Heermann:

1. Zu Cana war ein Hochzeitsfest,
Bey welchem sich auf Jesus lest
Mit seinen Jüngern finden.
Maria ordnet alles an,
Hilfft Braut und Bräutigam, wo sie kan.
Lest nichts an ihr erwinden.
2. Da nun die Gäste fröhlich seyn,
Kompt schnelle Post. Es mangelt Wein,
Kein Trank ist mehr vorhanden.
Maria bringt und spricht: O Sohn,
Es wil an Weine mangeln schon,
Der Bräutigam wird zu schanden.
3. Der Herr der sagt mit Ernst zu ihr:
Weib, stelle mir nicht Ordnung für,
Die Stund ist noch nicht kommen.
Ich weiss Ihr Creutz: Ich weiss auch wol,
Wann ich aus Nöthen helfen sol.
Als sie dies Wort vernommen,
4. Lest sie den Ernst sich schrecken nicht,
Laufft zu den Dienern hin und spricht:

- Wir wollen nicht verzagen.
Seyd nur getrost und wolgemuth,
Seht zu, (dass jhr bald alles thut)
Was Euch der Herr wird sagen.
5. Es stunden da nach jhrer Art
Sechs Wasserkrüge wol verwahrt
Und nach der Reih gesetzet.
Ein jeder Krug hielt sicherlich
Zwey oder auch drey Mass in sich,
Das wird trawn hoch geschätzt.
6. Ihr Diener, spricht der Herr, füllt mir
Voll Wasser diese Krüg allhier.
Sie thuns mit Wolgefallen
Und giessen sie bis oben an.
So recht, sagt Jesus: Nun wolan,
Jetzt schöpfft aus diesen allen.
7. Geht, bringts dem Speisemeister hin,
Der nimbt den Trank und kostet jhn.
Doch weil er nichts kann wissen
Von dem, was Jesus hat gethan,
Der grosse Held und Wundermann,
So wills ihn fast verdriessen.
8. Er ruft den Bräutigam und spricht:
In dich kan ich mich finden nicht.
Sonst gibt der Wirth den Gästen
Bald in der ersten guten Wein,
Den schlechten, wann sie trunken seyn,
Du speisest jetzt den besten.
9. Diss ist ein edler Rebensafft,
Gut am Geschmacke, stark an Krafft,
Man findt nicht seines gleichen.
Da sagen jhm die Diener frey,
Wo solcher Trank herkommen sey,
Diss ist das erste Zeichen:
10. Das Jesus that; Bald weit und breit
Ward kundbar seine Herrlichkeit
An allen Ort und Enden.
Die Jünger glaubten fest an jhn
Und liessen sich kein Creutz forthin
Von seiner Liebe wenden.
11. Herr Jesu, kehre heut auch ein
Ins Haus, wo fromm Ehleutlin seyn,
Und wend ab allen Schaden.
Kombt Creutz, als wie es oftmals pflegt,

Und sich mit ihnen schlafen legt,
So rette sie mit Gnaden.

Johann Philipp von Schönborn:

1. ZV Cana war ein Hochzeit-mahl/
Da ware in der Gästenzahl
Die Mutter vnsers HERren.
Im gleichen auch gebetten war
HErr Jesus/mit der Jünger schahr/
Zu diesem Tag der ehren.
2. Vnd als es an dem Wein gebrach/
Die Mutter zu dem HERren sprach:
Es ist kein Wein vorhanden.
Er sprach: Was gibt es mir vnd dir/
O Weib? Mein stund ist noch mit hir;
Es dörrfte keines anden.
3. Die Mutter zu den Dienern sagt:
Nehmt sein befelch sehr wol in acht/
Denselben zu vollbringen.
Sechs Wasser-krüg warn hingesezt/
Wie mit sich bracht das alt Gesetz;
Drin etlich massen gingen.
4. Mit Wasser/ sprach er/ füllt sie an/
Vnd überliffert solche dann
Dem Speiser oder Schencken.
Der Speiser/ als er schenckte ein/
Befund/ dass war ein guter Wein:
Wust nit/ was er solt dencken.
5. Den Dienern aber wars bekandt/
Goss Wasser selbst mit ihrer hand
Geschöpfft/ vnd drein getragen.
Der Speiser rieff den Bräutigam/
Vnd ihn auff eine seiten nahm/
Vnd sprach: Was soll ich sagen?
6. Ein jeder speiset guten Wein
Am anfang; wann sie truncken seyn/
Da gibt er nicht vom besten.
Du aber den gebrauch verkehrst/
Vnd gibst den besten jetzund erst
Den schon begnügten Gästen.
7. Diss war die erste Wunderthat/
So Christ der HErr gewürcket hat
In Galilaeer Landen;
Darduch er seine Herrligkeit
Zu Cana erstlich aussgebreit/

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Bey frembden vnd bekandten.
8. Sobald er dieses werck gethan/
Da fingen seine Jünger an
Auff ihn mit fleiss zu schawen:
Vnd glaubten starck dass eben er/
Der recht vnd wahr Messias wär/
Dem sicher sey zu trawen.

Obviously there are similar phrases in the two versions, but much more apparent is the *lack* of similarity.

Quite obviously we have been dealing, not with great poetry, but with verse written for a specific, essentially non-literary purpose. Both Heermann, the pastor crowned poet, and Johann Philipp, the statesman-prelate, succeeded not only in producing many good hymns, but also in producing at least some good poems. It is perhaps because of their sincerity and deep religious feeling that both succeeded where a much greater poet, Opitz, failed.²⁰

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NOTES

¹Philip Wackernagel, *Das deutsche Kirchenlied von den ältesten Zeiten bis zum Anfang des XVII. Jahrhunderts*, 5 Bde. (Leipzig, 1864-77); Wendelin von Maltzahn, *Deutscher Bücherschatz des 16., 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts* (Jena, 1875); A. Fr. W. Fischer u. W. Tümpel, *Das deutsche evangelische Kirchenlied des 17. Jahrhunderts*, 6 Bde. (Gütersloh, 1904-06); Curt von Faber du Faur, *German Baroque Literature*, 2 vols. (New Haven, 1958, 1969).

²Renate Gerling, *Schriftwort und lyrisches Wort*, (Meisenheim, 1969), p. 4.

³For discussion of psalm poetry and related problems as well as for bibliographical information see: Erich Trunz, "Die deutschen Übersetzungen des Hugenottenpsalters," *Euphorion*, 29 (1928), 578-617; Erich Trunz, "Über deutsche Nachdichtungen der Psalmen seit der Reformation," in *Gestalt, Gedanke, Geheimnis: Festschrift für Johannes Pfeiffer* (Berlin, 1969), pp. 365-380. See also footnote 11.

⁴Hugo Max, *Martin Opitz als geistlicher Dichter* (Heidelberg, 1931), p. 126.

⁵There is to the best of my knowledge no general study of epistle or gospel poetry. Even the *Reallexikon* is not helpful.

⁶Wackernagel is fairly complete to 1600. For Catholic works, particularly after 1600, see: Wilhelm Bäumker, *Das katholische deutsche Kirchenlied in seiner Singweisen*, 4 Bde. (Freiburg, 1883-1911); Otto Ursprung, *Die katholische Kirchenmusik* (Potsdam, 1931).

⁷Carl Hitzeroth, *Johann Heermann* (Marburg, 1907; rpt. New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1968), p. 23. Hitzeroth's discussion of editions, the date of various versions, etc. is in part dated but still valuable.

⁸Quoted from Hitzeroth, op. cit., p. 22.

⁹Quoted from Hitzeroth, op. cit., p. 140.

¹⁰Schönbornarchiv/Wiesentheid (hereafter AW), Bestand Johann Philipp 2759 and 2870.

¹¹For a further discussion of the writings of Johann Philipp see: W. G. Marigold, "Die 'Königlichen Psalmen' des Kurfürsten Johann Philipp von Schönborn," *Mainfränkisches Jahrbuch für Geschichte und Kunst*, 22 (1970), 187-216; W. G. Marigold, "Some Rhymed German

Translations of the Psalter," *University of Dayton Review*, 7, No. 3 (Spring 1971), 3-11; Johann Philipp von Schönborn, *Die Psalmen des Königlichen Propheten Davids, mit einer Einführung von W. G. Marigold*, Classics in Germanic Literatures and Philosophy (N.Y.: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1972).

¹²See Georg Mentz, *Johann Philipp von Schönborn*, 2 Bde. (Jena, 1896); A.Ph. Brück, "Der Mainzer 'Unionsplan' aus dem Jahre 1660," *Jahrbuch für das Bistum Mainz*, 8 (1960), 148-162. Correspondence with the papal court and with the liberal Protestant theologians in Helmstedt scattered in the Schönborn Archives/Wiesentheid and various public archives, notably the Staatsarchiv Würzburg.

¹³For Leibniz' stay in Mainz and for a study of conditions there see: G. E. Guhrauer, *Kurmainz in der Epoche von 1672*, 2 Bde. (Hamburg, 1839); Paul Wiedeburg, *Der junge Leibniz. Das Reich und Europa. I. Teil: Mainz* (Wiesbaden, 1962).

¹⁴Günter Müller, *Geschichte des deutschen Liedes* (München, 1925), p. 38.

¹⁵Conversations and correspondence with Professor Gottron.

¹⁶AW, Bestand Johann Philipp 2759.

¹⁷AW, Bestand Johann Philipp 2766, 2769.

¹⁸For Johann Philipp's poems we use a copy of the edition of 1653 in the Würzburg University Library.

¹⁹Quoted from Hitzeroth, op. cit., p. 138-140.

²⁰This paper was originally presented at the University of Kentucky Foreign Language Conference, April, 1972.