

**THE LORENZO DA PONTE EPISODE IN
FERDINAND KÜRNBERGER'S
DER AMERIKA-MÜDE***

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It has long been known that Ferdinand Kürnberger's novel *Der Amerika-Müde* of 1855 was pieced together from a wide variety of sources. Primary among them, of course, are the letters of Nikolaus Lenau about his American experience. But, as George A. Mulfinger showed in his 1903 Chicago dissertation, there were a number of others, including several of the novels of Charles Sealsfield.¹ It is clear from examining the relationship of the sources to the novel that Kürnberger proceeded by a method that, when I was a undergraduate, was sometimes applied to the writing of term papers and was called "plagiaristic synthesis." Often Kürnberger's seams are rather ineptly sewn; one example is a scene taken over virtually verbatim from Sealsfield's *Morton oder die große Tour*, which fits awkwardly into the sense of the novel, since the villain of Sealsfield's next is a German farmer, while Kürnberger is constantly concerned to present the Germans as the only decent element in American society.² Given this method for writing a novel about America without ever having been there, it is likely that further sources remain to be indentified. I make no great claims for myself for having found one of them; it was easy enough. But I want to use the example for some considerations on the scholarly treatment of this book and of the nineteenth-century German novels about America generally.

Early in the novel the protagonist Moorfeld encounters on the streets of New York a melancholy, broken-down old man with whom he exchanges a few words in

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Italian.³ When they meet again towards the end of the book, they engage in a conversation on two subjects: the beauties of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, and the miserable fate of a man of culture and sensibility in the barbaric United States.⁴ The old man, it soon appears, is Mozart's librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte, now a wreck washed up on the inhospitable American shore. "Ich werde meine Memorabilien schreiben," says he,⁵ thus pointing the experienced reader of Kürnberger to one more stone in the plagiaristic mosaic.

We must now pause for a moment to explain how Kürnberger's hero could have run across Da Ponte in New York in what must be the early 1820s.⁶ Da Ponte, approximately six months older than Goethe, was born of Jewish parents in 1749 and from an early age set out upon an adventurous life as what one might designate as a practical poet. Among his gifts were not only the capacity to produce in useful genres, but also a retentiveness, extraordinary in so patchily educated a man, for the great classics of Latin and Italian literature. In the Vienna of Emperor Joseph II, whom he boundlessly admired, he made his indelible mark in the cultural history of mankind as the librettist of Salieri and, of course, Mozart. After the death of Joseph II in 1790 and of Mozart in 1791, he wandered to Holland and then to London, where he labored as a theater director and bookseller. In London, as so often in his life, he got into insoluble financial difficulties, and emigrated to the United States in 1805. Thus began his American saga, which includes an effort to set himself up as a grocer in New York and as a storekeeper and distiller in Sunbury, Pennsylvania, with disastrous consequences, after which he returned to New York in 1818, dying there twenty years later. In New York he had been taken up by the wealthy and highly literate Clement Moore, the author of "The Night Before Christmas," who met Da Ponte in a bookstore in 1807 and encouraged him in his persistent purpose of making Italian literature better known in the United States; Moore's father, who was a bishop and a man of a considerable influence, also helped him. With varying success, Da Ponte gave private lessons in Italian language and literature. In 1825 he was appointed the

first professor of Italian at Columbia College, of which Bishop Moore had been president. He received no salary for this post and was allowed only the tuition of his relatively few students, but this was not unusual, for the modern foreign languages were not at that time a part of the regular curriculum, and all foreign language professors were in the same situation. Da Ponte himself regarded the professorship from a wholly practical point of view, endeavoring to use it as an anchor for his bookselling.

Da Ponte wrote his memoirs in several installments. The first version appeared in 1823; the purpose was not only to give a justification of his checkered career and to pillory his many enemies, but also to produce a modern Italian language textbook, which he sold to his students. An expanded version appeared in 1829. I do not know whether Kürnberger knew Italian. In the novel a few Italian phrases are worked into the conversation between Moorfeld and Da Ponte. But I think it unlikely that Kürnberger knew the memoirs in the original; they were published in New York and were banned in Italy and Austria, for, apart from his devotion to Joseph II, Da Ponte had rather disrespectful things to say about the House of Habsburg. The first German translation of the memoirs, an anonymous one, appeared in Stuttgart in 1847, and I am pretty sure that it was Kürnberger's source.⁷

The Da Ponte episode, which is only a matter of a few pages, can for our purposes be divided into three segments. One is a flowery speech of Moorfeld about *Don Giovanni*, to which Da Ponte replies with an observation on the importance of a good finale to an opera. The second is an anecdote Da Ponte tells of an American girl singing a Mozart aria poorly; when he tries to inspire her to a better performance and identifies himself as the author of the text, a leathery American gentleman interposes with: "Mein Herr, es kümmert uns blutwenig, womit Sie und Ihr Mozart sich in Europa Ihr Brod verdient. Daraus fließt kein Gesetz für uns in Amerika, die Kunst andres [*sic*] zu treiben, als es uns beliebt."⁸ The third is Da Ponte's complaint about the heart-

less commercial spirit of America that has duped and bankrupted the helpless cultured European.

The passage about the opera finale is taken nearly verbatim from Da Ponte's memoirs.⁹ Although there have been a few minor deletions and syntactical changes, the diction is so close as to make it most probable that the 1847 translation was Kürnberger's source. Like some of his other borrowings, it fits awkwardly into the text, having no connection with Moorfeld's effusions on *Don Giovanni*. In fact, in Da Ponte's text the passage has nothing to do with *Don Giovanni* but is a comment on the libretto for *Ricco d'un giorno*, written for Salieri. Kürnberger, doubtless sensing the incongruity, tries to pass it off with a remark about the quaintness of Da Ponte's eighteenth-century manner.

The anecdote about the incompetent American singer and the philistine gentleman is not to be found in Da Ponte. It may, however, derive from another story to the effect that when Da Ponte hoped during his first stay in New York to give instruction in Latin, he was told "*daß die Herren Amerikaner genug zu wissen glauben, um keinen Unterricht von einem lateinischen Italiener zu bedürfen.*"¹⁰ It is altogether probable that Kürnberger picked up the tone of this passage and fit it to an invention of his own that coheres with the main theme of the novel, the pervasive, crassly commercial Yankee boorishness that is inimical to all genuine culture. It might be remarked parenthetically that there are several similar, if much funnier, scenes of Yankee know-it-alls in Charles Dickens' *Martin Chuzzlewit*, which appeared in German translation immediately upon its publication in 1843-1844. It would not be surprising if it were to be discovered that Kürnberger was influenced by Dickens' America novel.

The third element of the episode, the lugubrious description of the hero of European culture ruined by America, requires a somewhat closer look at Da Ponte himself and the text of his memoirs. It is true that Da Ponte in America, especially in Sunbury, had a string of epic commercial and financial disasters, and by his own account he was grievously

cheated and maltreated, though not always by Yankees; some of his most persistent adversaries were his fellow Italians. The same was true of his life in London, and he had found himself frequently abused in Germany, Austria, and Italy as well. Now it is clear from the historical record, and ought to be suspected by any intelligent reader, that Da Ponte's memoirs are systematically self-seeking and selective; no man can have been so relentless abused in total innocence for eighty-nine years. He himself was clearly not without guile, though he lacked talent for genuine rascality. His American editor Arthur Livingston remarked that he was "at the worst, a usurer and a speculator, handicapped by a large dose of native honesty and a tender heart."¹¹ Kürnberger's picture of him as a miserable derelict is laughable. Although he seems to have been virtually chronically bankrupt, he lived in a fairly grand style in a fine house on Broadway and always kept servants and a horse. One of his sons became an accomplished Classicist and Professor of Italian at the University of Maryland and New York University, and married a niece of President Monroe's wife.¹² Da Ponte was, at times, at least, something of a social lion, and he was rather successful in his purpose of propagating Italian culture in America; he is regarded as the father of Italian studies in this country.

Now there is no reason that Kürnberger should have known all this, for Da Ponte does not always stress the bright side in his memoirs. Furthermore, the 1847 translation lacks the fifth part, published in 1829, in which a number of his successes are reported, among them the appointment to the Columbia professorship. One passage that might have given Kürnberger something to think about in regard to the utter absence of culture in America is Da Ponte's enthusiastic account of highly successful New York performances of Rossini's *Barber of Seville* in 1825 and of *Don Giovanni* itself in 1826. One can be sure, of course, that Kürnberger would have found no use for these items in his novel. But it should have been clear to him from what he could read that Da Ponte did not regard America and especially New York as a locus of desolate misery. When describing his departure from

England he speaks of America as “ein glücklicher Welttheil, durch welchen ich meinen geneigten Leser führen werde, gleichwie die gütige Vorsehung es mir gethan hat.”¹³ He immediately comments on how much less rigorous American laws concerning debtors are than the English, a circumstance of no little interest to him. Despite his grueling experiences in Pennsylvania, he seems to have regarded New York, perhaps excepting Joseph II’s Vienna, as the happiest environment of his life: “Durch die vielen in Sunbury ausgesetzten Plagen und Qualen wurde ich endlich auf ganz wunderbare Weise wieder in die für mich so theure und gesegnete Stadt Newyork zurückgeführt, und welche höchst angenehme Folgen meine Rückkehr dahin sowohl für mich als für Andere gehabt hat, werde ich in der Folge beschreiben.”¹⁴ From this passage alone one can see that Kürnberger’s picture of Da Ponte in America is an outright falsification. Nor can his use of Da Ponte as an example of the absence of culture in America be regarded as anything but mendacious. Da Ponte makes it altogether clear, and the historical record supports him, that he was recognized, patronized, and encouraged by highly cultured people, especially Clement Moore, to whom Da Ponte is generously grateful in his memoirs.

Near the end of his dissertation, Mulfinger wrote: “Dass sich ein Mensch, der nie in Amerika war, untersteht, aus willkürlich zusammengelesenen und oft entstellten Berichten solche Urteile über Amerika zu fällen, wie es Kürnberger die Helden seines Romans thun lässt, gehört zu den grossen Impertinenzen der Litteratur.”¹⁵ We may smile at this patriotic feeling of 1903, which today we find harder to sustain. But Mulfinger’s instinct was right. In the first place, Kürnberger’s treatment of Da Ponte speaks against him as a novelist. Da Ponte was an extremely interesting character. He was a modern picaro, careening dizzyingly from the highest success to the grittiest misfortune and back again. He reminds one strongly of Casanova, whom he knew personally and on whose memoirs his are modelled, though Da Ponte’s are a great deal less salacious and also in some ways concerned with more substantial matters. Despite his failings of

character, he is not only exceptionally appealing owing to the fundamental goodness of his heart, but was quite clearly unusually talented and a serious cultural figure. What a gift he ought to be to the realistic novelist! Kürnberger's reduction of him to a snivelling wretch cowering in a doorway in New York is an aesthetic and intellectual offense.

But, beyond this, it should be remembered that novels of this kind were for the nineteenth-century German public a context for meditation about America, doubtless helping to solve the question of emigration that must have preoccupied literally millions of minds. *Der Amerika-Müde* was by no means an obscure book. It was published in a series called "Deutsche Bibliothek: Sammlung auserlesener Original-Romane," which included such authors as Hermann Kurz, whose *Der Sonnenwirth* appeared simultaneously in this series, and the former Young Germans Ferdinand Gustav Kühne and Ernst Willkomm, whose bizarre novel, *Die Europamüden* of 1838, obviously inspired Kürnberger's title. Thus it is clear that the literary environment was liberal, but it is equally clear that Kürnberger's liberalism was of the nationalistic, not the democratic, denomination, for *Der Amerika-Müde*, as I have argued elsewhere,¹⁶ is primarily a tract of German national chauvinism. It was republished in 1857 in a series called "Allgemeine Hausbibliothek." In 1890 it was taken into the Reclam series, wrongly designated as "Zweite Auflage." The editor, though willing to grant that Kürnberger's view of America had been made obsolete by time, expressed the hope that the wide distribution of the Reclam volumes would bring him new readers.¹⁷ The novel appeared again in 1910 as a volume in Kürnberger's collected works, published in Munich. It was republished in 1927 in Vienna. That it was passed up by the Nazis must have been an oversight, caused, perhaps, by Kürnberger's reputation in literary history as a liberal. In 1973 it was published in East Germany, accompanied by a solemn recommendation of the book as a warning against "die Abgründe des Phänomens Amerika."¹⁸ It is not superfluous to add that this same commentary refers to the "Gestalt da Pontes, des begnadeten Librettisten und Mozart-Freundes," in which is exhibited

“die tragische Entfremdungssituation des Künstlers, ja des Individuums in der kapitalistischen Welt.”¹⁹

This balderdash is unfortunately not altogether uncharacteristic of the treatment of the German American novels in literary history.²⁰ It is in the first instance a failure of elementary philology, a lack of evaluative inquiry into the source and ideological motivations of these works, along with a failure to pay some informed attention to American history. It was not until 1975 that the provincial absurdities of Lenau's account of his American experience, which forms the main foundation of Kürnberger's novel, were exposed by Manfred Durzak.²¹ The irredeemably foolish *Amerika-Müde* is perhaps too easy a target for such an inquiry, but it might usefully be applied to other authors, for example, Sealsfield. One can read over and over again of Sealsfield's democratic and republican allegiances and certainly they are an important feature of his role as a dissident author in the German and Austrian context. But I have yet to encounter a historically informed analysis of his Jacksonian partisanship and his own location within it, which would raise troubling questions about racism and imperialism, among other things. For example, I have long wondered whether it would be possible to learn more about Sealsfield's alleged connections to the Freemasons, a question that I suspect may have been muddled by the ideological fantasies of his biographer Eduard Castle, and to inquire in particular whether they might have something to do with his unreasonably violent opposition to John Quincy Adams, to whom a so-called Anti-Masonic Party became allied. There is much useful scholarly work of this kind to be done in this area, and American Germanists are uniquely well placed to pursue it.

NOTES

1. Georg A. Mulfinger, *Ferdinand Kürnberger's Roman "Der Amerika-müde," dessen Quellen und Verhältnis zu Lenaus Amerikareise* (Philadelphia: "German American Annals" Press, 1903).

2. Ferdinand Kürnberger, *Der Amerika-Müde: Amerikanisches Kulturbild* (Frankfurt am Main: Meidinger, 1855), pp. 288-292; cf. Charles Sealsfield, *Gesamt-*

ausgabe der Amerikanischen Romane (Meersburg am Bodensee and Leipzig: Hendel, [1937], II: 358-362. See also Mulfinger, pp. 32-33.

3. Kürnberger, *Der Amerika-Müde*, pp. 75-76.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 469-477.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 476.

6. The action of the novel cannot be precisely dated. Usually it is thought to be in the early 1830s, the time of Lenau's American experience. One scene introduces the aged ex-President Monroe, who died in 1831. However, Da Ponte says he is in his seventy-second year (p. 477), which would place the scene in 1820 or 1821. That would be consistent with his intention to publish his memoirs.

7. *Memoiren von Lorenz da Ponte von Ceneda. Von ihm selbst in New-York herausgegeben* (Stuttgart: Verlag der Franck'schen Buchhandlung, 1847). The only copy of this I was able to discover in the United States is in the Newberry Library in Chicago. I am grateful to the Newberry Library for providing me with a microfilm. A more complete and better known translation appeared as *Denkwürdigkeiten des Lorenzo da Ponte von Ceneda*, tr. Eduard Burckhardt (Gotha: Opetz, 1861). This, of course, is too late to be Kürnberger's source.

8. Kürnberger, *Der Amerika-Müde*, p. 476.

9. *Memoiren von Lorenz da Ponte*, [I]: 115-116.

10. *Ibid.*, [II]: 159.

11. *Memoirs of Lorenzo Da Ponte*, tr. Elisabeth Abbott, ed. Arthur Livingston, with a Preface by Thomas G. Bergin (New York: Orion Press, 1959), p. xv.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 270, n. 216.

13. *Memoiren von Lorenz da Ponte*, [II]: 139.

14. *Ibid.*, [II]: 196-197.

15. Mulfinger, p. 51.

16. "Land of Limited Possibilities: America in the Nineteenth-Century German Novel," *Yale Review* 68 (1978/79): 49.

17. V. K. Schembera, ed., Ferdinand Kürnberger, *Der Amerikamüde: Amerikanisches Kulturbild* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1890), p. 3.

18. Ferdinand Kürnberger, *Der Amerikamüde*, ed. Friedemann Berger (Weimar: Kiepenheuer, [1973]), p. 565.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 572.

20. See, for example, Rüdiger Steinlein, "Ferdinand Kürnbergers 'Der Amerikamüde'. Ein 'amerikanisches Kulturbild' als Entwurf einer negativen Utopie," in *Amerika in der deutschen Literatur: Neue Welt—Nordamerika—USA*, ed. Sigrid Bauschinger, Horst Denkler, and Wilfried Malsch (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1975), pp. 154-177. Steinlein seems to draw most of his knowledge of America from the writings of Marx and Engels.

21. Manfred Durzak, "Nach Amerika. Gerstäckers Widerlegung der Lenau-Legende," in *ibid.*, pp. 135-153.

RECENT PUBLICATION

Sharifa A. Bogina, *Immigrantskoe naselenie, SShA, 1865-1900*. Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Nauka, 1976. 273 p.

Studies the history of American immigration from 1865-1900 with special attention to the Germans, the Italians, and the Scandinavians.
