

ANOTHER PLANET: TEXAS IN GERMAN LITERATURE

by *A. Leslie Willson*

The contact between Texas and the German intellect began very early. The imprint made upon the imaginations of readers around the world by Texas was amazing, considering the tedious pathways taken in the nineteenth century by what have become known as mass media. And the contributions of German writers to the legend of Texas—as well as contributions in later years to a more realistic though at times still myth-ridden image—began early and continue today.

In an exodus from Austria that is still surrounded by mystery, a monastic rebel against the absolutism and despotism of Metternich, Karl Anton Postl—born in 1793 in the hamlet of Poppitz in the Austrian province of Moravia—fled with the help of Freemason friends through Switzerland to France, and took ship there under the temporary identity of a Monsieur Sidons for New Orleans, where he landed in August 1823. In the course of time Monsieur Sidons became an American citizen called Charles Sealsfield, under which name he wrote books about his new homeland that became bestsellers in Europe and, in translation, in England and America. He lived in Pennsylvania for a time, traveled through Mexico, and from afar was fascinated by the spirited battle for independence of a young Texas, an event that he celebrated in a rousing mixture of fact and fancy in a volume entitled *The Cabin Book*. Not until his death in Switzerland in 1864 did his family learn what had happened to Karl Postl—by the terms of his will he left his not inconsiderable riches to his surviving brothers. It was the first word they had had from him in forty-one years.

Shortly after its appearance in Germany *The Cabin Book* was translated in 1844 into English. In 1852 and in 1871 there followed new printings of the volume. It contains a long story entitled “The Jacinto Prairie,” in which a young Marylander named Colonel Edward Nathanael Morse plays a companion role in the struggle of heroic Texans for liberty. In a recent adaptation of the tale by Ulrich S. Carrington for readers today, the story is as gripping

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and spell-binding under a new title, "On Fields Unshorn," as it was when it came fresh from the pen of a newly-minted American patriot.¹

The Texas of 1832—the year Sealsfield settled in Switzerland because of ill health—comes to life in "On Fields Unshorn." Young Colonel Morse, who admits in the frame that introduces his first-person narrative that there is "indeed a lot of rabble in Texas" (an admission that another character remarks is a larger concession than ought to be made by a Texan), first saw Texas at Galveston:

Now, mind you, the shores of the mouth of the Rio de Brazos, Galveston Bay that is, has none of the terrifying aspects of your Mississippi delta, for a very simple reason: you can't see them. All you can see is an island about sixty miles long that lies in the sun like an immense lizard crushed flat by the feet of some giant. It shows not the slightest elevation. There is neither a house on it nor a cabin, and not one single tree. No, I am wrong, there were three solitary, dwarfed trees at the far western end, visible for ten miles despite their smallness. Without them the mouth of the river could not be found at all. The oldest skippers are in the worst predicament here because the land, so to speak, swells out of the water and sinks back into distant ripples which blend in with the billowing green of the prairie grass. Only a well-trained eye is able to tell land from water. (P. 26)

Colonel Morse extols the Texas coastland prairie, "the boundless sea of waving green," which to him becomes the virginal core of a Garden of Eden, "God's world immaculate!" (p. 27). He speaks of the "immeasurable beauty" of Texas forests (p. 31), of the comforts of a kind climate with air "as clear and springlike . . . in early March as it rarely was in Maryland by the end of May" (p. 33), where no one should be surprised by "ripe strawberries in March, mister. . . . You're in Texas!" (p. 39). The Texas sun encouraged trees to grow to a "stately height" and the "true aristocrats of the Texas forests" were the live oaks, "every one of them awe-inspiring in his floating robe of moss, fashioned by centuries" (p. 56).

One live oak tree plays a chief role in the story, a tree haunted by the spirit of a murdered man, a great oak witness to one putative and another actual example of quick justice by hanging. The description of the great oak, called the Patriarch, is enough to evoke wonderment:

I halted before this venerable monarch of the woods, a forest in itself, who towered a hundred and thirty feet above the common trees. From branch to branch, the lowest even wider than its height, hung countless beards of shiny grayish moss that seemed to hide a thousand curious faces. And all of the colossus was glimmering and flimmering with a million flakes of emerald green. It was a sight of Nature grown into the Supernatural. The wind was softly whistling through the silky canopies, and from within I heard the sougling of the aged limbs. It sounded to me like a dirge, a prelude to the scene of death that I had come to witness.

. . . Coming from the sun outside, I could not see, at first, into what a miracle I entered. I only felt the awesome coolness that touches you when passing through the portals of an ancient church. And then I saw, but would not trust my eyes. The column of the massive trunk held, fifty feet above me, high branches of the Patriarch that vaulted down on a cupola of foliage. And through the leaves was breaking light in rainbow hues as from the

stained glass windows of a Gothic dome. It played upon the rusty grass and shrubbery, in red and orange, green and purple, and, in the misty glow, transformed the hanging moss into fantastic draperies. (Pp. 96-97)

Texas is a fabulous land, with jaguars, and with "vicious snakes and scorpions and spiders, bigger than" a fist. The bones of the Texas rabble "pave the road into a better tomorrow" (p. 77). Even then Texas hospitality is legendary, for

no Texan would ever think of asking you to pay for bed or board. You were always treated as an invited guest and could stay as long as you chose. If you were charged for anything, you could bet the settler was New England bred. In fact, hotels and boarding houses were run exclusively by Yankees from the North. (P. 31)

Colonel Morse takes part in the Texas fight for independence: He knows Travis and Austin and Houston, he mourns Goliad and Fannin, he is appalled by the slaughter at the Alamo, he besieges and conquers San Antonio, and he fights at Harrisburg. He reports the capture of Santa Anna, who has tried to slink away unrecognized at San Jacinto through the tall grasses. He recounts the story of an example of the Texas rabble, a hunter and murderer and supreme fighter named Bob Rock, whose heroism more than once saves the day for Texas forces. And that Texas, quivering with purpose and indignation, is not so different from the mythic Texas of today. For then, as today, "in Texas, nails grow overnight into horseshoes" (p. 117).

Charles Sealsfield set the image of Texas for English and German readers for decades. His Texas was wild, a place of rabble-rousing frontiersmen, liberty-loving individualists who recognized the necessity of bending the law on occasion for the sake of a greater freedom. Texas was a land of critters and varmints. It had broad plains, magnificent trees, and winding rivers. Cowboys and six-guns were inseparable entities. Every Texan knew how to make a horse rear up in exuberance. Texas, and Texans, were big and mighty and boastful.

German writers traveling to Texas in the 1960s and 1970s, a hundred and forty years after Sealsfield, have mixed feelings about Texas.² They come knowing of the large and indelible German heritage in Texas through immigrants, and they come with the image of Sealsfield's Texas etched on their minds. And they find in Austin, in the words of Max Frisch in his *Sketchbook 1966-1971*, "A skunk running around the park at night: first time I have seen one in its natural state; but you shouldn't get too near, says my friendly host, a German scholar, a dean on the edge of the prairie."³ Texas is still large and grand. It is the end of March 1971, and the Swiss writer Frisch has flown to Austin from New York:

... as long as from Zurich to Moscow, but at both ends the beer is the same. So the capital of Texas is Austin—not Dallas, as I previously thought. The Capitol with its classical dome, floodlit at night, proves it. . . . Here it is already summer, the oleander [sic] now

fading. It is not really a city, but one huge park: nothing urban in its generous use of space, simply an oasis of comfort. (P. 298)

Max Frisch is a widely-traveled man, familiar both with Texas and with Mexico; locales of both are found in his novels and stories. He calls the West "the true America" (*I'm Not Stiller*, p. 44).

Horst Bienek, another casual visitor to Austin, describes the city "in the milky evening sun of a day in February" as "a small, panoramic, well-tended . . . city of homes that breathe repose and calmness," a place where man is still the measure.⁴ Bienek, an imaginative and inventive poet as well as a novelist, mythologizes the poet and critic Christopher Middleton, a faculty member in the Department of Germanic Languages at The University of Texas at Austin. Bienek describes a visit to Middleton's isolated home in the woods, "barely reached by the last electric line," and as they sit drinking wine, they "fall silent, soon we will become engulfed, in the undergrowth, in the primeval forest, in the void, the green creepers growing into our mouths" (p. 165).

Such a fantasy is not shared by Peter Rühmkorf, a West German poet who in the fall of 1969 found Texas to be a hive of arch-conservative professors who could not tell the difference between socialism and sociology, professors who believed that the path from Johnson to Nixon meant socio-political progress. Rühmkorf found little to like in Austin and at the University; he was depressed and mistrustful.⁵ The same cannot be said about Hans Bender, the editor of the most prominent literary magazine in Germany, *Akzente*, who found an ideal in Texas in a student whom he imagined he saw later in a train in Germany. As he relates his vision:

A young American is sitting across from me in the train. He reminds me of [a graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin]. Even if he did not speak, I would recognize him as an American, probably as a Texan, by his university ring and his watch band, by his tie clip and his gigantic shoes.

He looks out the window of the train at the Main River, at the June-green meadows and fields on the banks, at the hamlets with their city walls and gothic or baroque church steeples. Then he lowers his glance again to the pages of the book that he holds in his hands, to read a few lines farther, not with very much concentration. The book: *Diary of a Young Girl*—Anne Frank's diary. Frankian idyll and fascist horror juxtaposed.⁶

On the example of a chance observation in a train, preferably of an American who is a Texan with big feet, Bender draws an accusatory and uncomfortable parallel between the nature of Texas and the reality of Germany.

For Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, a genial and iconoclastic poet who was a visitor at The University of Texas at Austin in the spring of 1974 and who died under the wheels of a London automobile almost exactly a year later, Texas was still a wonder, a source of image and metaphor for the poetic world he constructed. To him "Death is a dead skunk on the highway."⁷ When he arrived in Austin he thought he was on the edge of the desert—Texas is, after all, cactus and rattlesnakes—but at the Villa Capri Motel he found Kleenex

handy, beer delivered by the black cleanup man, and a dessicated palm beside the swimming pool (p. 44). In his apartment complex, the Voyageurs on East 31st Street in Austin, as he says in one poem, he looked through an open window into the apparently limitless blue afternoon, and he had nightmares about policemen behind barbed-wire fences (p. 76). There was an aroma of crushed wheat and hay and camomile in the evening, and people eating French fries (p. 77). In his typically irreverent way he speaks in another poem of the South that he intuits in Texas, the South of words, of asphalt and auto graveyards, big-eyed, moth-filled, the South with green-blue swimming pools, beetles, suburbs, balconies, perspiring hips, scorpions, color TVs, and a misty full moon. It is a South of shut-down gas stations, pale-yellow sandy paths, dead skunks, concrete—a real South that is transformed into a fictional South, a South of rustling foliage (p. 79).

But in a poem entitled "A Skunk," Brinkmann captures the essence of what modern-day Texas meant to him. A dead skunk on the highway, on a highway in the wide and endless landscape of Texas, a land that belongs to mostly invisible wild animals still, a land with abandoned railway lines beside poor shacks, and a land—very strange to a German accustomed to the centuries-long history of tiny villages—where towns spring up and disappear like dragon's teeth, where a Texas schoolteacher must tell her pupils that the town in which she was born no longer exists:⁸

A SKUNK

in the morning, dead, run over
 on the already soft
 asphalt, gives you the impression
 that the morning itself
 had been run over,
 you hold your breath
 and roll up the car window
 where the land stretches endlessly
 on both sides, Texas, fenced in,
 the flat hide-out.
 Who walks along the highway
 in cowboy boots and cries about
 the dead animals? Who curses
 the air conditioning that
 doesn't work? Who lives in the
 trailer smoking the dream
 weed, looking over the plain?
 Who has eaten the bull's pizzle,
 the mountain oyster? Who teaches
 the children? The land and the
 animals on it belong to somebody

you don't see. And the
 strangest thing is that you
 don't see the animals either,

 although the drive lasts for
 hours. A family is looking
 out of a shack next to the

 railroad tracks, no longer in service.
 You ask yourself how they live.
 They live, one after the other.

 Next to the bushes, the yellow
 Sunday school bus is rusting away.
 It looks abstract, awk

 ward, without color, like a
 child's drawing. Some years
 later the town has vanished,

 and you look over the bare frames
 that have become incomprehensible,
 you remember the dead

 skunk on the highway one
 morning, jostled by the bus,
 the States, the town where I was

 born no longer exists, the young
 teacher tells the children, who
 ask her: where do you come from?

Brinkmann's creative spirit gives a late glimpse of the German encounter with the Texas of today, a Texas far removed from the legendary six-flags Texas or Sealsfield's romanticism.

No less traumatic was the impact of Texas on a writer from East Germany, a very distinguished poet and novelist, Günter Kunert, who was a guest lecturer at The University of Texas at Austin in the fall of 1972. Kunert, who wrote about the University, about Lavaca Street and its assorted shops, about the capitol building and the Old Bakery on Congress Avenue, and about the Lion Safari and the Wax Museum in Dallas, seems to have been sorely disappointed that Texas dry-cleaner coathangers were not equal to the weight of East Berlin coats. The hangers crumpled.

Prior to his visit to Texas, Kunert wrote about Texas witchcraft in a poem. He excoriates President Johnson for conjuring up a false freedom in Vietnam. He compares Johnson to a modern Merlin who cannot, however, revive burned Vietnamese children. But this is the same Kunert who, caught with his wife in the swirls and cold of a Santa Fe blizzard, thinks of and longs for home: and to his astonishment realizes that he is thinking not of his East Berlin domicile but of his Austin apartment. Kunert's Texas is a real place, not a mythical amalgamation of legend and lore.

Martin Walser, a prominent German author who was a guest in Austin in the fall of 1973, recently published a poem entitled "Attempt to Understand a Feeling,"⁹ in which the first line reads:

Who can explain to me my homesickness for America?

And which continues:

What must be the content of the concrete that reaches
 from here to Texas
 and that endures as long as the lovely sky there?
 What shall I do with the elegant oaks, the cedars,
 uncounted, that have grown high in my mind?
 What can I do with the deathless slogans from the
 supermarket
 that contain the southern curvature of lips that bore
 them?

He continues later in the poem:

Was it the determined heat?
 Was it the highways that always led to the horizon?

 Was it the brass band from Boerne that in San Antonio
 played on the Spanish-shaded river like on a post-
 card from 1910?
 Was it the oranges from the Rio Grande Valley, the pan-
 cake house on the interstate?
 Or was it the girl on TV who let slogans for Franklin's
 Savings melt on her lips utterly?
 Was it green Tennessee or cotton-headed Texas?

 Was it the concrete shawl that circles Houston?
 Maybe I'm susceptible to good weather,
 Maybe in bars, lecture halls, department stores and
 on beaches I met your democracy, Walt Whitman.

 Could my homesickness for America be a homesickness for
 the future?

 As always my frail colleague sits in Austin confronted
 by the massive Sophie edition of Goethe.
 As always the football supermen thrust their great
 strength on the ball disappeared deeply into the
 pile.

 I'd like to be on the Rio Grande and mix Apache yells
 with those of Auschwitz.
 I'd like to be in Tennessee that sweeps so many hills
 after the sun, and none is called Hohenzollern,
 I'd like to be in Virginia, the land of leaves, to forget,
 I'd like to be in Texas, and learn to brag about myself,
 I'd like to be far away.

Walser's longing for Texas is matched in the briefest way with possibly the most subtle and deeply-felt compliment to Texas in contemporary German letters, found in a massive, four-volume work by novelist Uwe Johnson. In his *Anniversaries* a precocious ten-year-old quizzes her mother about the lakes in which the mother has swum. The mother, Gesine Cresspahl, recounts lakes in East Germany, West Germany, France, and in New York State—and lists, among others, Lake Travis. The young daughter, properly critical and sagacious, says: "Eighteen valid, four invalid, one doubtful, and my very heartiest congratulations for Lake Travis in Texas!"¹⁰

The saga of Texas in German writing is far from over. Texas is still a fabled land, and those writers who do visit Texas are still compelled to note their impressions, oftentimes with a wry sense of a loss of myth. Even writers whose only contact with Texas is through correspondence with Texans are occasionally inspired to integrate the qualities of the land and its people into their works. For example, Friederike Mayrocker in her story "in a rundown neighborhood" weaves the wonder of roses that bloom in December (in Austin) with reflections on the wintry end of life.¹¹ Works by Christoph Meckel, Christian Wallner, and Fred Viebahn contain specific references to Texas, Texans, and the still legendary aura of the exotic and quixotic that enfolds the State in their imaginations. And, finally, in the office of the president of the Suhrkamp Verlag in Frankfurt am Main, Siegfried Unseld has set a small Texas flag in a place of honor.

NOTES

1. Charles Sealsfield, *The Making of an American. An Adaptation of Memorable Tales by Charles Sealsfield*, trans. Ulrich S. Carrington (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1974). Further references to this adaptation of Sealsfield in English are given parenthetically in the text.

2. The gap between Sealsfield and contemporary German observers is partially filled by the writers discussed in Winfred Lehmann's article in this issue. There were not very many, and Sealsfield influenced many of them.

3. Max Frisch, *Sketchbook 1966-1971*, trans. Geoffrey Skelton (New York: A Helen & Kurt Wolff Book, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), p. 298. Further references are given parenthetically in the text.

4. Horst Bienek, "In Amerika," in *Ensemble 6*, Jahrbuch der bayerischen Akademie der Künste, 1975, p. 164. My translation.

5. Peter Rühmkorf, *Die Jahre die Ihr kennt, Anfälle und Erinnerungen* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1972), pp. 232-234.

6. Hans Bender, *Aufzeichnungen einiger Tage*, LCB-Editionen 25 (Berlin: Literarisches Colloquium, 1971), pp. 9-10. My translation.

7. Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, *Westwärts 1 & 2* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1975), p. 127.
8. The translation of the poem is by Helmut Schnell, from *Dimension* 8/3 (1975): 423-425.
9. In *Tintenfisch* 8 (Berlin: Klaus Wagenback Verlag, 1975), pp. 27-30.
10. Uwe Johnson, *Jahrestage* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970—), vol. III, p. 1019.
11. In a translation by Michael P. Elzay in *Dimension* 6/1 (1973): 100 ff.