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MY GERMANY

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I am going to talk to you about my experience of Germany, its language and culture. For clarity, I add that when I speak of Germany, or German, I include much that is from outside that geographical and political entity we know as Germany. For example composers such as Mozart and Schubert who came from Austria, or writers like Kafka and Rilke, who came from Prague count as German within this definition. This means we are talking about a Germany of my imagination. With its borders so defined, let's enter.

My first awareness of Germany comes in early childhood. My oldest friend, has a German mother. This is probably my first awareness of *any* country other my own, and that there might be different languages to English. My friend's mother comes from Hamlin on the Wese, the town with the story of the Pied Piper, which I remember being read to me from a book of fairy stories, which also included others like Hansel and Gretel and Rumpelstiltskin which were written down by the Bothers Grimm. In the book, there were pictures of white castles, like those built by Ludwig II here in Bavaria. One way or another, Germany has been in my imagination from very early.

My next glimpse comes through music. In the nineteenth century, Germans visiting Britain called it "Das Land ohne Musik." An injustice, maybe, but with some truth in it. It was long before an Englishman became Director of the Berlin Philharmonic. Plus, of course, Germany's contribution to music is huge. We could start with the method of "well tempering," devised by Andreas Werckmeister, which is still used in the modern pianoforte and was later demonstrated to brilliant effect by Johann Sebastian Bach in the "Well-Tempered Clavier." This is a development without which much of modern western music would be unimaginable. Composers like Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Wagner and Mahler still dominate the classical repertoire in a way without parallel. I listened to recordings of their works on the yellow Deutsche Gramaphon label with performers like Herbert von Karajan, Dietrich Fischer Dieskau and Anne-Sophie Mutter. Even to this day, I still listen, or play much German music.

Yet, of course, I cannot completely explain what music offers. I agree with Nietzsche that "By means of music, the passions enjoy themselves."¹ Yet even this does not do justice to say Beethoven's 9th Symphony or Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. Rilke called music "*Sprache wo Sprachen enden./Language where language ends*"² I agree with that also. Yet in the phrase there is also the admission when one tries to define what music does, it defeats even the words of a great poet. All the arts are an attempt to express something we cannot completely grasp, and music can reach areas we cannot define.

1 Nietzsche: *Beyond Good and Evil*-106 (trans R.J Hollingdale, Penguin).

2 Rainer Maria Rilke-An Die Musik (trans Robert Bly)

With recordings of music sometimes there were also translations of German poems that were set to music by the likes of Schubert and Schumann. It is here that I first saw names of the likes of Goethe, Schiller and Heine, and read their poems. It was an aid to my learning German, which I began to study and to read its literature in translation often with a greater enthusiasm than for English Literature. For me German literature seemed to address matters like soul and the quest for meaning more directly.

The first great German writer I appreciated was Nietzsche. I loved his passion, his wildness, and also, something not always acknowledged in his writing, his humour. Above all I loved his understanding of psychological paradoxes as in this aphorism: “He who despises himself still nonetheless respects himself as one who despises.”³

Nietzsche made me aware of human tragedy, for example with this aphorism: “One is punished most for one’s virtues.”⁴ This helped me to understand other writings whether they are Greek Tragedy, Shakespeare or the operas of Wagner. He challenged and stimulated my thinking, and helped me to clarify my own opinions. I still find him one of the most wonderful writers to read, not least because he embraces life fully and holds to the possibility, even in a godless universe, that human beings can overcome their limitations.

I found this attitude common to many other German writers even if they adopted different philosophical positions. Herman Hesse’s novels such as *Narziss und Goldmund* and *Sidharta* are about people seeking the way to live their lives, as is that strange, beautiful work, *Steppenwolf* in which I found a mirror for many of my despairs. Freud and Jung offered an understanding of my relations to others and suggested ways I might heal my own psychological problems. And of course there is a great deal of this in the writings of Goethe.

I am not saying one cannot find anything of this in the English tradition. It is there, for example, in writings of the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the American Ralph Waldo Emerson, though one could still say there is German influence in them, as both read Goethe. What I am saying is that there is a different slant on these matters, and I believe some of this comes from the languages.

To illustrate this, I will consider poems that I love, one from each language. The first is Goethe’s *Wanderers Nachtlied*. I first discovered this in my teens in one of the grammars I learned German from. The art of learning and reciting poems from memory has disappeared in English education. Yet, I know this one by heart. Here it is:

Wanderers Nachtlied II

Über allen Gipfeln
Ist Ruh,
In allen Wipfeln
Spürest du
Kaum einen Hauch
Die Vögelein schweigen in Walde.
Warte nur, balde
Ruhest du auch.

Wanderers Night Song

Above every hilltop
There is peace,
Above every treetop
You hear
Hardly a breath.
The birds are asleep in the woods.
Wait a while
And you too will find peace.⁵

For me, this is one the most perfect poems ever written. I love it’s simplicity of language, that still manages to express a profound kinship with nature. In twenty-four words of German Goethe says so much. I love the way he uses the word “*der Ruhe*” to link the quiet of an evening, the mountains and birds to the calm of his own mind. I love also the sounds of the words that vibrate through my body when I recite it to myself. And there is, like in all great poems, something in the words that reaches beyond what words can say.

3 *Ibid* - 68.

4 *Ibid*- 132 (trans R.J Hollingdale, Penguin).

5 translated by Graham Mummery

By way of contrast, here is another famous poem. It is by the English poet, William Wordsworth, who lived in a part of England that Goethe's *Wanderers Nachtlied* might have been set in. It was the first great poem I came to know:

Daffodils

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed--and gazed--but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

What I want to draw your attention to in this poem is the different way Wordsworth brings in nature. Goethe creates his scene starting with the word "*der Ruhe*" He invites the reader to draw on a feeling and from that to enter the scene. Wordsworth does something different. He paints details of flowers, colours and light. He tells us how many there are, of his being beside a lake, how the flowers reminded him of stars. Though he later speaks of his joy in the beauty of the flowers, it is already implied in the details.

I not saying one way is better than the other. Both poets count for me amongst the greatest in any language. What I do suggest is that the way each creates his effect is by looking at things in a slightly different way. The Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges wrote: "A language is a tradition, a way of grasping reality."⁶ I would say in each of these poems, we can see reflected in the language of each poem, the culture and world view that the poets wrote in. In some ways it is often mentioned difference of the philosophical traditions: German metaphysics and English empiricism.

One might even see this in the grammar. In German adjectives agree with whether nouns are masculine, feminine or neuter. In addition, articles and nouns are also required to agree with whether they are in the nominative, accusative, dative, genitives. This, to my mind, gives German a "holistic" quality, connecting everything to each other. Thus Goethe

⁶ Jorge Luis Borges-*The Gold of Tigers* translated by Alistair Read, in *The Book of Sand*, Penguin

connects his mind to the nature in part because of a metaphysical quality that is embodied in the structure of the German language.

English, by contrast, has no declensions, or agreements of adjectives. This sometimes leaves culture. For example, let's take things unexpressed, though they well may be assumed to be there in English language and in a simple example the word "*die schöne Erde*" in German. From the article I see that "*Erde*" has feminine qualities, a very common idea also in mythology where the Earth is often been portrayed as a nurturing goddess. The English equivalent is "the beautiful Earth." Interestingly, there is a phrase in English, "mother earth" which suggests that the same idea of Earth being feminine exists in the language, but there is nothing of this here. Of course when we come declensions, German grammar connects article and noun to what ever is happening in even more ways than English, but hopefully you get the general idea. As the French poet, Yves Bonnefoy puts it: "English concerns itself naturally with tangible aspects. It accepts the reality of what can be observed and does not admit the possibility of any other kind, of another order of reality."⁷

These differences, obviously, can be over stated. When I was thinking over these ideas, an English friend of mine responded: "Maybe, Graham, but aren't there also English metaphysicians and German empiricists?" A very "English empiricist" response to my "Germanic reasoning!" Of course he is right, certainly in the philosophical sense. These differences are not really opposites as much as complementary ways of looking at the world: the "metaphysical" German emphasizes the imagination and dream-like aspects of it, the "empirical" English emphasises fact and thing. If we look back at the poems we find they both *also* remind us that mind and world cannot exist without each other. Goethe does this by bringing his mood of "*Ruhe*" into his description of the scene, while Wordsworth does it by telling us of his memory of the flowers and what affect that had on him. What connects them is poetry making us more aware of a beautiful world.

However, we live now in a post-modern world that is not kind to poetry. Even at the time of Rilke it was possible to hold to an optimistic vision of life, and to praise it. Today we are haunted by Theodore Adorno's phrase, "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbarous" which has been used to suggest that writing poetry is no longer possible. The phrase was written at a time when the horrors of Auschwitz were fresh in people's minds, and thus must have seemed very plausible. Poetry can seem inadequate when faced with brutal reality. The history of Germany in the twentieth century is a tragic testament to this. As a lover of both poetry and German culture, which has given voice to some of the noblest utterances of the human spirit, I have to face the fact that human nature can produce both Beethoven's 9th Symphony and the "Black Milk" described in Paul Celan's *Death Fugue*

How this could come about has been examined thoroughly by others, not least German writers such as Thomas Mann, Gunter Grass and the psychologist Carl Jung. So I'm not going to offer explanations here, beyond pointing to Jung's view that everything has its dark, or shadow side. That the greater the good we are capable of may be balanced with the potential for correspondingly greater evils. What I will point to is poetry's ability to help us face the darkness -the *Death Fugue* is such a poem. Thus it seems to me that poetry *has to be possible* after Auschwitz, because it can also remind us of the possibility of better worlds.

The poet who is most entitled to offer this alternative to the pessimism in Adorno's words is Paul Celan. Celan, who survived labour camps, and whose family was destroyed in the Holocaust. Yet, having faced this brutality he could still

⁷ Yves Bonnefoy: *The Act and Place of Poetry* University of Chicago Press.

write about the possibility of “*Lieder zu singen jenseits der Menschen.*” So I will let him speak:

FADENSONNEN

über der grauschwarzen Ödnis.
*Ein baum -
hoher Gedanke
greift sich den Lichtton; es sind
noch Lieder zu singen jenseits
der Menschen.*

THREAD-SUNS

above the grey black wilderness.
A tree-
high thought
tunes in to light's pitch: there are
still songs to be sung on the other side
of mankind.⁸

I am nearing the end my talk. If I were to sum up what German culture has taught me, it is in the last words of this poem. It has given me a perspective with which to look at my English roots. It has opened me to new ideas. Above all it has taught me about myself, about both the good and the bad inside me. And perhaps in a way it has taught me about being English. So to I will end in a very English way- with humour.

It's very English to tell jokes, even when facing the most difficult things. Humour makes bitter medicine easier to swallow. Thus I've chosen a poem by Hans Magnus Enzensberger. I choose it also because he lives in Munich. He translated this poem himself into English (I don't know any English poet who with a similar ability with German!). Thus it seems right to end with him. We are celebrating here a form of poetic dialogue between our cultures. Dialogue helps us to reach beyond our limits. Once again into “*jenseits der Menschen!*” The poem reminds us, with Mozart-like lightness of touch, that all our perceptions, ideas, and even languages are boxes. Beautiful and magnificent, but boxes all the same:

⁸ translated by Michael Hamburger in *Paul Celan: Selected Poems* Penguin

Erkenntnistheoretisches Modell

Hier hast du
eine große Schachtel
mit der Aufschrift
Schachtel.
Wenn du sie öffnest,
findest du darein
eine Schachtel
mit der Aufschrift
Schachtel
aus einer Schachtel.
mit der Aufschrift
Schachtel
Wenn du sie öffnest -
ich meine jetzt
diese Schachtel,
nicht jene - ,
findest du darein
eine Schachtel
mit der Aufschrift
Und so weiter,
und wenn du
so weiter machst,
findest du
nach unendlichen Mühen
eine unendlich kleine
Schachtel
mit der Aufschrift
so winzig,
daß sie dir gleichsam
vor den Augen
verdunstet.
Es ist eine Schachtel
die nur in deiner Einbildung
existiert.
Eine vollkommen leere
Schachtel.

Model toward a Theory of Cognition

Here is a box for you,
a large box
with the label
Box.
When you open it
you will find inside
a box
with the label
box
from a box
with the label
Box.
When you open it -
I mean still
this box
not the other one -
you will find inside
a box
with the label
And so on,
and when you
carry on again
you find
after endless mistakes
an infinitely small
box
with the label
so weenie
that the lettering
in front of your eyes
dissolves.
It is a box
that only in your imagination
has any existence.
A perfect empty
box.box.⁹

⁹ Translation HME adapted by Graham Mummery

Thank you this opportunity to share these thoughts and poems with you. And thank you for listening.

About the Author

Graham Mummery was born in Altrincham, Cheshire, but has lived most of his life in or around Sevenoaks, Kent. He was educated at Ravenís Wood, Bromley and at the Judd, Tonbridge. He now works for an investment bank at Canary Wharf.

His first pamphlet collection, *The Gods have Become Diseases*, was published in 2006 and his poems and translations have appeared in various magazines including *Ambit*, *Brittle Star*, *Equinox*, *Obsessed With Pipework*, *Poetry Street*, *Psychopoetica* as well as on the BBC Kent Website and in the anthology *Gobby Deegansís Riposte*.

He has written poems on and off for many years but did not do this seriously until he enrolled at a creative writing course at his local Adult Education Centre. He has been on several Arvon Courses and attends a workshop at the Poetry School led by Moniza Alvi and another with John Stammers. He is also treasurer of the Kent & Sussex Poetry Society.