

Utah Valley University

From the Selected Works of Scott Abbott

2010

Review of Erhard Bahr's "Weimar on the Pacific"

Scott Abbott, *Utah Valley University*



SELECTEDWORKS™

Available at: http://works.bepress.com/scott_abbott/50/

"Furthermore, because *verstanden* immediately follows *verschrieben* und *verfertigen*, the notion of 'understanding' is also compromised" (112). The spatial vicinity of verbs and their shared prefix (*ver-*) are purported to create an interdependence of meaning.

The connection of the Latin verb for weaving, *textere*, with Kleist's *text*, also requires extensive etymological help: "Penthesilea's *Kranz*, with which Achilles desired to scar her, suggest an act of writing. Duden defines *Kranz* in terms of weaving: 'In der Form eines Rings geflochtene oder gebundene Blumen, Zweige.' *Flechten* is an act of weaving similar to/ the Latin *textere*" (144-45). At stake is Penthesilea's allegorical connection to idealist aesthetics: "*Gewand* does mean robe, not a veil, but its meaning is derived from *Tuch*. Moreover, like a veil, a *Gewand* or *Tuch* is a piece of woven fabric, and as such refers to the topos of a text's construction as weaving (*textere*), a metaphor that also constitutes an image of the aesthetic veil" (149). The connection of Achilles to language is similar: "The word 'text' is derived from the Latin *textere*, meaning to weave. Appropriately, the language used to describe Achilles evokes imagery of threads, tangles, and yarn, imagery which subtextually conveys linguistic significance. He is so closely associated with language that he occasionally weaves himself into a textual knot" (152).

The study as a whole is a thought-provoking and original contribution to recent Kleist scholarship. It makes good on the title's promise to show Kleist's use of female characters as a mean to subvert the aesthetic and philosophical certainties of idealist discourse. While a good deal of prior knowledge in regard to idealist philosophy, romantic aesthetics, and feminist theory certainly aids the reading of the book, the author gives sufficient background information for readers who are not versed in these fields. The audacity and novelty of many of the study's interpretative conclusions provide the reader with ample reason to reread (and rethink) Kleist's stories.

Swarthmore College

Hansjakob Werlen

Ehrhard Bahr, *Weimar on the Pacific: German Exile Culture in Los Angeles and the Crisis of Modernism*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007. 358 pp.

Newly arrived from Europe in 1939, Thomas Mann finished his novel *Lotte in Weimar* with words addressed to a celebrity: "Good god, Frau Hofrätin, I must say: To help Werther's Lotte out of Goethe's carriage, that is an event—what can I say? It must be written down." Two years later, *The New Yorker* titled society reporter Janet Flanner's article about Thomas Mann in California "Goethe in Hollywood." (Mann responded that every-other fact was false.) And with that the real and fictional journey through time and space from Goethe's eighteenth-century Weimar to the Weimar Republic's *Magic Mountain* and from there to Hollywood's mythical shores was completed.

In this forty-first volume of the distinguished series "Weimar Now: German Cultural Criticism," Ehrhard Bahr ranges from the theory of Adorno and Horkheimer to Brecht's California work, from the architecture of pre-exile Richard Neutra and Rudolph Schindler to works by Werfel and Döblin, and from Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus* to Schoenberg's late work. The book elicits some of the interdisciplinary pleasures apt to emerge from a look at a topic like this; but because it is more a set of loosely connected essays than the promised treatise on exile LA and modernism, it can be frustrating as well.

Bahr writes that his book is unique among studies of German-speaking exiles in LA because "the crisis of modernism . . . found a specific German answer in Los Angeles" (9). He cites Raymond Williams on modernism as a response to new media and border crossings (9). He uses Russell Berman's book *The Rise of the Modern German Novel* to think in passing about "fascist modernism, leftist modernism, and a modernism of social individuality" (11-12). In the book's first chapter he catalogues some of the arguments in Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and mentions Jameson's *A Singular Modernity* to talk about modernist defamiliarization (39-40). He writes about Brecht's California poetry as "a prime example of modernist poetics in exile" (104), but, oddly, does so in Bettina Englmann's postmodern context in which Brecht's "demand of realist literature was a demand for deconstruction" (104). He cites Ruth Klüger to the effect that modernism involves "in theme, a sense of doom and isolation, in form, a highly complex structure and a style that is not easily penetrable" (190). And repeatedly he seems to sum up modernity simply as a movement in whose art closure is denied (21).

Each of the works Bahr describes in some detail—and the number of novels and plays and buildings and musical compositions produced by these artists in exile is impressive indeed—is briefly measured against this hodgepodge standard of modernism and/or against ideas from Adorno and Horkheimer. For instance, Werfel's work, "in contrast to Adorno's concept of literature and art . . . is devoid of any dialectic . . . and is a 'regress to mythology'" (186). "Döblin's novel is a 'regress to mythology'" (222). And Schoenberg's California work made him a "true modernist" (265) whose art "made no compromises yet was still able to reach society. This was the goal of modernist art in exile" (272).

If the brief analyses of the various works in terms of theory are frustrating, not so the historical narratives Bahr constructs. He has worked on these German exiles for decades and knows their California haunts and habits like few others. He is especially intent on chronicling the positive responses of various exiles to their temporary asylum. Marcuse, for instance, described his sense that he was again "in the middle of the Weimar Republic" (21). Brecht, despite his poem comparing California with Hell, produced "perhaps more positive poems than negative ones in the Los Angeles cycle" (98). And Schoenberg said that his exile meant he had been "driven into paradise" (268). Some exiles, of course, did better than others. Thomas Mann lived without concern for money (while supporting his older brother Heinrich, who was destitute), but Schoenberg's \$29.60 monthly retirement payments from UCLA and failed Guggenheim grant application led him to think briefly about scoring the film of Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth*. Döblin was supported by the European Film Fund. And Werfel's *Song of Bernadette* was a "huge commercial success" (180) as a book and as a movie.

The chapters about Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus* and Schoenberg's exile works tell two tightly interwoven and detailed stories. Bahr skillfully describes Mann's work on *Doktor Faustus* in the context of his successes and lost opportunities in opposing fascism. The fascinating meeting of Brecht, Thomas and Heinrich Mann, Feuchtwanger, Bruno Frank, Marcuse, and others at the home of screenwriter Salka Viertel resulted in a joint statement supporting The Council for a Democratic Germany. Thomas Mann read the statement to the assembled exiles. And then, as Brecht reported in his diary, Mann soon withdrew his signa-

ture. Bahr writes interestingly about Mann's use of Goethe's Faust as a representative of Germany's soul, of the evil *and* the good German—ideas also expressed in his lecture at the Library of Congress in May 1945 titled "Germany and the Germans."

It is well known that Schoenberg's music is the basis for the music composed by Adrian Leverkühn in Mann's novel and that Adorno consulted with Mann as he wrote the novel. Bahr does a good job pointing out just how that happened and which of Adorno's ideas inform which parts of *Doktor Faustus*. And he lays out Schoenberg's response to the novel and Mann's attempts to clarify his use of Schoenberg's ideas, including his dedication of Schoenberg's copy of the novel to "dem Eigentlichen" (288).

The chapters on Brecht's poetry, on his play *Galileo*, and on his film, with Fritz Lang, *Hangmen Also Die*, similarly include good biographical and historical information. And the two-dozen photographs of artists and their California homes provide a visual sense of this important era during which Weimar found a brief home on the Pacific.

Utah Valley University

Scott Abbott