

Karl Wolfskehl: Two Poems
Andrew Wood

ALBATROS

Grossschwingen, flach gebreitetes Gegleit,
Riesige Schwingen, tragend, hingerissen
Hoch über Flut und Boot, schwärzlich und weit,
Lichtleicht, doch lichtdurchschneidend, unbeflissen

Als gält es Spiel - kein Spiel: als sei der Lüfte
Uratemdrang zur Schwinge ausgeschwenkt.
Und doch, wer Blick hat, merkt: von straffster Hüfte
Die Steuerfedern scharf und hart gelenkt.

Und hier, hier, fast zum Greifen nah, ein Grösster
Pfeilt streifend mir ans Haupt, entschwebt und peilt
Sich lässig bei, und immer wieder stösst er
Ins Unmessbare - Wunsch und Traum enteilt.

Das bist du, Albatros! von meiner Fähre
Schau ich dich in mich ein und grüsse lang,
Weitschwingend das Barett, dich, den Bodläre
Als Dichters Bild erhöht im Lobgesang.

Freisten dich, ihn den Känder, meine Lippe
Ist stark euch vorzurufen. Sturm und Wahn
Sind mir vertraut wie euch. Von selber Sippe
Durchmess ich, Hiob, Leids zeitlose Bahn.

ALBATROSS

Great wings, spread flat gliding,
Broad wings, bearing carried away
High over the deeps and boat, blackish and wide,
Light like light, yet light slashing, effortless

As if in play—but not play: as if the urge
Of air's primeval breath were embodied in the wing
And yet, who perceives: from taut flanks
The rudder feathers are controlled sharp and hard

And here, here, almost within reach, a majestic one
Arrow-like grazes my head, passing and vanishing
Leisurely, again and again, piercing
The immeasurable—desire and dream escape.

That is you, Albatross! From my ferry
I take in the vision and greet you long,
Waving my beret, saluting you whom Baudelaire
Lauded in the poem as an image of the poet.

You the most free, him the prophet, my lip
Has strength to hail you. Storm and delusion
Are as familiar to me as to you. Of the same tribe
I, Job, traverse the timeless path of suffering.

HEILIG UND HEIDNISCH

Mit einem Biedermeierschwan als Bonbonnière

»Old-fashioned, kaum antikes Porzellan?
Vom Zufall so wie wir hierher verschlagen?«
Meckre nicht! Mäkle nicht! Sieh: Schwan ist Schwan,
Glitzernd im Zwielight interessanter Sagen.

Ist es der Leda? Der zum Lohengrin?
Erwarb am End von Beiden er die Sporen?
Ob Ex-Zeus, *job* erflehnd, am Gral erschien,
Der Götterfürst im Brot beim Reinen Toren?

Erst lehrt' er Leda wie man Eier legt,
Dann half er, keusch, Tenören übers Nasse,
Heut endlich zeig er, dichterisch erregt,
Dass Süß-Tun mehr als Mies-Muss zu ihm passe.

Wieder beim Märchen-Mädchen langt er an,

Doch diesmal, ältlich, spendend aus dem Buckel,
Nicht aus dem - psssst - Zeus, sei ein Stummer Schwan!
Dann nimmt Sie dich samt deinem Kriegesuckel!

SACRED AND PROFANE

With a Biedermeier bonbonnière in the shape of a swan

“‘Old-fashioned’, hardly antique porcelain?
Ended up here by coincidence just like us?”
Don’t complain! Don’t find fault! Look: swan is swan,
Gleaming in the twilight of fascinating myths.

Is he Leda’s? Or Lohengrin’s?
Did he even acquire knight’s spurs from both?
Whether ex-Zeus asking for a *job*, appeared at the Grail?
The ruler of the gods in service to the Innocent Fool?

First he taught Leda to lay eggs,
Then he helped, chaste, tenors o’er the water,
Finally today, poetically aroused, he shows
That sweet talk suits him better than forced bitterness.

Again he meets the fairytale maiden,
But this time, older, he donates from his bending *back*,
Not from the *psssst*-Zeus, be a Mute Swan!
Then she’ll accept you and your amorous advances!

The German-Jewish poet Karl Wolfskehl (1869-1948) fled from the Nazis in 1933 to Switzerland and Italy. Up until 1938, Mussolini’s brand of fascism had been relatively ambivalent about the Jews—he himself had a Jewish mistress, Margherita Sarfatti—but eventually Il Duce gave in to Berlin and instituted anti-Jewish legislation. Wolfskehl was forced to flee again, this time to Auckland, where he found himself in a country of far less cultural density than he was used to, but at least where any anti-Semitism was of an ambiguous, abstract and only distantly received sort. New Zealand was in the terms of Austrian-Jewish philosopher Karl Popper (biding his exile at Canterbury University in Christchurch at the time) an “open society.”

In German letters, at least until the jackboot came down on the rich Jewish contribution to Germanic culture, Wolfskehl was a well known name linked with the circle of Stefan George,

and up until 1904 with Ludwig Klages and Alfred Schuler. In New Zealand he was little known outside of a circle of literary friends, and even then Frank Sargeson was to write in his 1975 autobiography *More Than Enough*: “There were times with Karl Wolfskehl when I could feel myself overpowered, weighted down by so much civilisation, a feeling which I had often and keenly experienced during my time in England...and now here I was once again being overpowered by Europe, and this time in my own country” (111).

Wolfskehl’s work continues to be published in Germany and the New Zealand composer Edwin Carr set five of his poems to music, first sung by Ronald Maconaghie at a Wolfskehl commemoration arranged by the New Zealand Embassy in Bonn in 1977. I came to his poetry through a desire to find a bridge between my fascination with German history, culture and language, and my New Zealand-ness. In exile, he had continued to write poetry, and most of his New Zealand production had never before been translated, and thus was lost to the majority of New Zealanders.

From a collection to be published by Holloway Press later this year I have chosen two poems—both coincidentally using birds as metaphors—which for me express the dual nature of Wolfskehl’s exile. The first “Albatros” expresses his sentiment upon his arrival in New Zealand (the albatross as bird of ill omen was largely an invention of Coleridge). The poem by Baudelaire alluded to is “L’Albatros” in which the poet compares himself with the great bird, graceful and dignified in his natural element of the air, but clumsy and clownish on deck when downed by cruel sailors: “Ce voyageur ailé, comme il est gauche et veule! / Lui, naguère si beau, qu’il est comique et laid!” Wolfskehl’s mentor George had made a number of translations of Baudelaire into German.

I was a little slow to grasp this at first as for some reason Wolfskehl wrote Baudelaire in phonetic German as “Bodläre” in the text, which is unusual. This does ensure that the terminal “e” is voiced, providing the rhyme for “Fähre.”. The poem’s soundscape suggests the albatrosses slashing wingbeat and gliding swoop. The reference to Job is to the long-suffering Old Testament figure, with whom, through all of his own tribulations, Wolfskehl occasionally adopted him as a persona in the early New Zealand poems of 1938-39, and sometimes in letters after 1945. This is not to be confused with the usage in Wolfskehl’s “Job” cycle, which is different.

In the second poem, “Heilig und Heidnisch” (“Sacred and Profane”) the poet’s lyrical persona discusses the find he made in a second hand shop and reflects on its possible meanings. He compares himself to a porcelain sweet dish in the shape of a swan in the Biedermeier style (an aesthetic sensibility popular among the bourgeoisie of Germany between the Napoleonic and Revolutionary eras) which he found in an Auckland second hand shop. Like the swan dish Wolfskehl is far from his place of origin. As the poem develops, Wolfskehl alludes to the two mythological faces of the swan—the disguise in which Zeus rapes Spartan Leda and fathers the Gemini twins Castor and Pollux (one of the poet’s nicknames in Germany was the “Zeus of Schwabing,” a suburb of Munich); and the chastely

pure Swan Knight Lohengrin of Arthurian legend, son of Sir Percival / Parsifal and popularised by Wagner's 1850 opera.

There is a wonderful humour in this poem in which Wolfskehl, commenting on age, makes a complex triple pun about his flagging powers:

Again he meets the fairytale maiden,
But this time, older, he donates from hunched *back*,
Not from the—*psssst*—Zeus, be a Mute Swan!
Then she'll accept you and your amorous advances!

Well aware he is too old for the "fairytale maiden," unable to please from the front, the swan / poet must induce her from his back, which could mean both the confections in the concavity of the swan dish, or the wallet in the old poet's back pocket.

The bonbonnière was a birthday present to the teenage daughter of close Auckland refugee friends.

Works Cited

Sargeson, Frank. *More Than Enough*. AH & AW Reed, 1975. Print.