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FRANZ WERFEL AS A CULTURAL CRITIC. INDIVIDUALISM, COLLECTIVISM AND THE MORAL-AESTHETIC TASK OF A POET

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This article is dedicated to the 90th anniversary of the heroic novel *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* created by great Austrian writer and humanist Franz Werfel. With this novel Franz Werfel created a literary monument to the Armenian people. Werfel's inspiration from his journey to Palestine and his encounter with Armenian orphans in Damascus are well known. Less known are his cultural-critical-philosophical essays that Werfel gave as lectures in the 1930s, framing his work on *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*. These texts are densely formulated, often without references or plain argumentation. But they hold insights into Werfel's moral demands on a poet, broaching that issue in the eras of communism, fascism, and genocide. This paper creates a moral-aesthetic profile that traces Werfel's socially critical remarks with his view of the task of a poet and contrasts them with another contemporary view of a poet, that of Rainer Maria Rilke.

Keywords: *Armenian Genocide, Franz Werfel, Communism, Fascism, Interwar Period, Rainer Maria Rilke, Orpheus.*

Introduction

In his 1935/1936 essay *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* [The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction], Walter Benjamin counted the poet Franz Werfel among the particularly reactionary authors (Benjamin, 2012, p. 22) who did not understand how to reconcile the change in media from painting to photography to film with whether the overall character of art has changed. Instead, such authors interpret cultic elements with an unparalleled ruthlessness into film, seeking its meaning not exactly in the sacred, but in the supernatural (Benjamin, 2012, p. 23). Theodor W. Adorno commented on this in a letter to his friend Benjamin, applauding: "The blow against Werfel gave me great pleasure" (Adorno, 1994, p. 172).

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Even if Benjamin and Adorno exchanged views on Werfel's naïve view of the medium of film, this criticism can be seen as an indication of his desire to categorise the poet in terms of epochal history even during his lifetime, Werfel seems to have been labeled a reactionary and non-modern writer. Franz Brunner, for example, is convinced that *Die Geschwister von Neapel* [The Siblings of Naples] – published in 1931 – a book that Werfel himself held in high regard, is just an old-fashioned family book next to Robert Musil's modern novel *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* [The Man without Qualities], published in 1930. The first extensive receptions of Werfel still focus very strongly on religious-philosophical elements in his work and life, which should not lend less lustre to the title of a particularly reactionary author (Michael, 1994, p. 23). Just as, analyses of the extensive novel *The Forty of Musa Dagh*, published in 1933, which deals with the history of the Armenian Genocide and foreshadowed the National Socialist genocidal atrocities, also suspect Werfel of being unfashionable. The novel is “not contemporary, it also seems backward-looking despite the often powerfully formulated criticism of nationalism. Modernity does not permit such naïve storytelling, especially not in a novel about modern mass murder” (Dittmann, 1996, p. 175).

So where can Franz Werfel's oeuvre be located? This article approaches the question by analysing the cultural-critical-philosophical essays that Werfel gave as lectures in the 1930s, which have received little attention to date. These texts are densely formulated, often without references or clear argumentation. For this reason alone, it is necessary to analyse and contextualise these essays in their literary context. To this end, I will create a moral-aesthetic profile that traces Werfel's socially critical remarks with his view of the task of a poet and contrasts them with contemporary views.

Criticism of a disenchanted world

In his lecture *Realismus und Innerlichkeit* [Realism and Inwardness], held on 6 May 1931 at the Vienna Cultural Association, Franz Werfel states a mortal danger that threatens the inwardness of man. In the style of the contemporary modern philosophy of culture, calling all the ups and downs of the West, we find a broad criticism of existing conditions, which begins with a Hofmannsthal-like Lord Chandos feeling and denounces contemporary radical realism. Werfel understands this in the broadest sense as an image of man from the rationalist-technical point of view of usability. In contrast to the “Seufzern um eine verlorene Gemütlichkeit” [Sighs for a Lost Cosiness], which is the “most cowardly and disgusting expression of incurable philistine souls,” and who would rather travel by stagecoach again than by train, Werfel assumes a transformation of the human soul that represents a real danger: “Technology is our terrible fate. We must not succumb to it.” (Werfel, 1975, p. 19). Rather, the aim is to understand radical realism in the course of a world history of value and ideal formations, i.e., to uncover its normative dimensions, to create a genealogy of morality, as it were. This is why

Werfel speaks of *realism* in the following to emphasise its societal shaping power and its divisive character: “Every attitude is judgemental. Every judgement divides. Every division has a fanatically aggressive effect. The enemy, the hate project of realism, is the inwardness of man, his soul, the creative spirit.” (Werfel, 1975, p. 20).

This names a pair of opposites – realism and inwardness or positivism and creative spirit – which Werfel works throughout the whole text. In analysing this opposition, both a metaphysical and a historical perspective are adopted. Let us first look at the historical interpretation, which advocates a critique of the capitalist world: “The world was transformed with magical speed. It succumbed to the material impulse more masochistically than it had ever succumbed to a spiritual impulse (Werfel, 1975, p. 22). It goes on about this masochism: “The pointless purpose of labour is not to satisfy needs, but to create needs.” And: “Things have become the measure of man” (Werfel, 1975, p. 27). The economization of living time and the living environment can only grasp measurable value. Thus, the realism relies on the calculating, constructive mind, which resolves the object into numbers and formulae. The claim to power, which emerges in the will to make things tangible, is justified by the promise of the real mindset to solve the “Lebensfrage” (the question of life), i.e. the question of happiness through the complete subjugation of cosmic forces to their purposes and through the seamlessly rational structure of society (Werfel, 1975, p. 27). The object receives its meaning through its usability, which is best achieved by renouncing independence. This maelstrom of realism also takes hold of the person who affirms it and tends towards standardization. “The standardized brain triumphs”, Werfel writes in summary. Once this attitude to reality, this mental philistinism, has become ingrained in people's minds, it is not so far from a critique of capital to a critique of political conditions. Both communist and nationalist currents are social forms characterised by a realist attitude. In the novel fragment *Cella oder Die Überwinder* (Cella or The Overcomers) written in 1938 -1939 and published posthumously in 1952, we find a very impressive description of the standardized brains of SS men. Werfel first describes these men outwardly as “consistently beautiful men, one like the other, tall, well-educated, slim, with small, military-cut blond heads, broad shoulders and narrow hips.” (Werfel, 1997, p. 190), only later he contrasts this false beauty to their mental constitution: “There was a grandiose emptiness and self-abandonment on the faces of these men that had probably never been seen before in the course of history. They seemed to be nothing more than transmissions of an alien will, which for them meant life itself. They lived so cleanly, so precisely, so without thought, so without conscience, as motors live. They were just waiting to be started or switched off” (Werfel, 1982, p. 190).

The decisive word in this passage is *self-abandonment*. It expresses the state of the *doers*, as it says in some places, and contrasts with an image of man that is characterized by inwardness. The metaphysical dimension is also named with the inwardness that focusses on the ego. The object of the realism is not the ego, but the motor man, who is always subject to the will of another from outside. These people have only instrumental understanding, without reason and self, which can no longer be

experienced or suffered in the slightest. Werfel contrasts this to the creative spirit, the spiritual-soul human being, whose basic position is not rational and positivistic, but aesthetically conditioned. This human being, Werfel continues, “reveals himself in the three spheres of religion and morality, science and speculation, art and imagination” (Werfel, 1975, p. 29). What is interesting here is the possibility of realising the creative spirit in two other areas of society, not just in art. Religion and science are also suitable for promoting the inwardness of man. However, according to Werfel, “modern science is for the most part in the camp of realism” (Werfel, 1975, p. 30). The only thing that remains is art, which increasingly resists factual belief: “Only the creative person is able to rebuild the inwardness destroyed by factual belief” (Werfel, 1975, p. 30). According to Werfel, all people have a creative core, but in the majority of cases this seems to have been buried by a belief in reality; it must be rediscovered. This view is handed down in the topos of recollection, as can be found in classical form in Plato's dialogues Menon and Phaidon, for example. In Plato, this concept of anamnesis, of (re)memory, serves to illustrate the process of cognition from the sensible to the non-sensible and plays a role in the proof of the immortality of the soul. For our context, however, the use of anamnesis in the context of the Socratic dialogue is more important, as this is where Werfel's idea of the artist ties in.

In Plato's Menon, Socrates urges a slave boy, who has no mathematical knowledge from school, to solve a geometric problem (doubling the area of a square). Socrates repeatedly emphasizes that he does not want to teach the boy anything, but only to stimulate his own thoughts through the art of maths, which should ultimately lead to an understanding of the geometric problem. After a few typical Socratic-aporetic situations, the boy finally solves the problem by forming the double area as a square on the diagonal of the original square. In this way, Socrates wants to prove his assertion that this mathematical realization is based on a pre-natal insight that the boy has either always possessed or acquired at some point before his present life. Universally valid theorems such as geometry are therefore already inherent in the human soul. Through this Socratic stimulation, a non-knower can be led to find access to a knowledge hidden within him that does not originate from the experiential world of his present existence.

Werfel interprets this idea of anamnesis in an aesthetic way. In his lecture *Von der reinsten Glückseligkeit des Menschen* [Of the purest bliss of man] delivered to the League of Nations in Vienna in 1937, he states: “This Platonic memory also explains the so peculiar shocks we owe to art. In a life of attrition, our soul suddenly remembers its innate powers, it temporarily becomes spiritual, it comes to itself in its original fullness. In the strict sense, therefore, only this spiritual vision, evoked in us by image, song, thought - Plato calls it *μαῖα* – puts us in a state of pure bliss. All other pleasures belong to the lower order of instinctual gratifications” (Werfel, 1975, p. 100).

The sphere of art is therefore able to awaken the creative human being in every person. In contrast to Plato, Werfel does not portray this person as one who strives forward step by step, remembering and recognizing. Rather, it seems to be about

emphasizing a feeling that wants to break through into the realm of the absolute in order to evoke a happy state of the soul. The movement that takes place is that of a vision that enters us in a shattering way. Werfel speaks of spiritual as opposed to natural. Recollection in the spiritual sense rehearses and promotes a relationship to inwardness. Only then can something be set against the nature-orientated sense of reality. In this inspirational conception of aesthetics, the artist is the one who triggers this vision through the work of art. In other words, the artist is a media-saturated Socrates who produces bliss through maieutic-material suddenness. But how is this happiness structured? Is it supposed to reconcile us with the yoke of realism or stimulate a religious vision? Are we not talking about an anaesthetic gradient here? These questions urge us to consider Werfel's conception of the poet.

An orphic conception of the poet

Franz Werfel began his oeuvre as a writer with poetry and drama, which can be categorized under the term Expressionism, which has become a coagulated formula. However, Werfel's description of the poet's task and structure did not change in the course of his turn to epic poetry. Only the content to be proclaimed by the poet changed with the increasing intensification of religious and real-historical totalizing developments. In the early play *Die Versuchung* [The Temptation] published in 1912, the poet asks: "God, God, am I the medium that connects the unsuspecting in you with the world, am I the guiding conscious substance between you and infinity?" He gives himself the answer: "Yes, that is it. The others are human beings! Another passage of the same work reads: "Do you know yourselves, you humans? You poor, poor, simple-minded clever ones! And you, superior professor, brave monist, what do you know about the world? Poor, simple-minded clever one! Only I, only I understand you!" (Werfel, 1959, pp. 624-626). In these lines, a division is drawn between the world and God, which Werfel later repeatedly refers to with the vertical phrase *between above and below*. The *between* indicates the position of man, whereby the poet has a special mediating status. He seems to be endowed with priestly dignity; it is in him that the images are created which alone are valid.

Werfel repeatedly refers to Orpheus, in contrast to the real-minded Prometheus, when he wants to give a picture of how the poet evokes inwardness. Orpheus, son of the muse Calliope and probably Apollo, was a gifted lyre player who tamed animals and moved stones with his wisdom. When he played, the wheel of Ixion stood still, Sisyphus rested for a moment on his stone; even Hades was enchanted and released Eurydice. This movement of banishment, of pausing, of standing still can lead to a state of inwardness.

In order to understand how this mediating role of an Orpheus-poet is structured in Werfel's work, I would like to contextualize it by looking at another image of an Orpheus-poet: that of Werfel's poetic contemporary Rainer Maria Rilke, who developed an independent image of Orpheus-poet following Friedrich Nietzsche. This

comparison is obvious insofar as Werfel writes very significantly about Rilke in his record Encounters with Rilke: “Rilke gave me the first concept of the poet: An infinite openness and constant conception of life. If this concept in its passivity could no longer suffice for me later – Rilke nevertheless appeared to be its purest embodiment. He was the great poet for me” (Werfel, 1992, p. 310). Werfel implicitly criticizes the moment of passivity. What exactly is meant by this?

Rilke engaged with Nietzsche early on, but did not realize the radical nature of his re-evaluating philosophy until later. While the wrestling, religious approach in *Das Stunden-Buch* [The Book of Hours] published in 1905), an artistic attitude of prayer as it were, is considered incompatible with Nietzsche's rejection of an insubstantial concept of God, Rilke comes very close to the artist metaphysics of him in the *Duineser Elegien* [Duino Elegies] published in 1922 and the *Sonette an Orpheus* [Sonnets to Orpheus] published in 1922). Rilke's starting point is a lament that is supposed to change, based on the dissected misery of man. Where to? Into a future that is not projected into a transcendence that can never be reached or expressed, but manifests itself in the here and now. The ninth Duino Elegy states: “Once, for each thing, only once. Once, and no more”. The momentary affirmation of the entire horizon of experience in the form of praise and laudation across all abysses measures out a metaphysical character of affirmation. In the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, this attitude is moulded into an invitation to a metaphysics of the transformations of lamentation by the Orpheus-poet. This movement begins in the third sonnet with “Ein Gott vermags. Gesang ist Dasein” [A God has the power. Song is – to be], moves on to “To celebrate in song, – yes!” in the seventh sonnet and on to the eighth with “Exultation knows, and fierce Desire acknowledges, – Only Lamentation must still learn” and “Dares come only within the compass of praising, of song” (Rilke, 2006, pp. 724-726).

As with Werfel, the Orpheus-poet Rilke takes a jolt towards inwardness. But if these laments immanent to the world are seen in things, the subject of the lament must renounce his subjectivity by penetrating things through perception. Thus it is no longer subordinated to the recognizing subject but reveals its equality of essence with the depersonalized subject. In this new immanence of things, the boundary between subject and object dissolves. They celebrate their aesthetically molded, simultaneous oneness in a world that has become conscious of itself. Through this lyrical monism, the terms subject and object become relative, leaving only the realization that can be described as the unity of all being. This corresponds to Nietzsche's Dionysian cognition: “while by the mystical cheer of Dionysus the spell of individuation is broken, and the way lies open to the Mothers of Being” (Nietzsche, 2003, p. 103). This aesthetic standpoint denies any separation of ego and world, subject and object, man and things and ultimately rejects any kind of principium individuationis in a fusion of immanence and transcendence. Nietzsche's dictum from *The Birth of Tragedy*, “that it is only an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world, appear justified” (Nietzsche, 2003, p. 152) correlates here with Rilke's remark in a letter to his translator Witold Hulewicz: “There is neither this world nor the hereafter, but the great unity] and, Rilke continues:

“Yes, for our task is to imprint this temporary, fragile earth in us so deeply, so sufferingly and passionately that its essence invisibly arises again in us” (Rilke, 1991, p. 376). As a poet, here Rilke formulates the claim to express the tragedy of existence perfectly by capturing the wretched world within himself and playing out this inwardness with the magic of the moment against the space of the principle of individuation. Man is the redeemer of himself and experiences this eternal moment with the highest exultation, which not only transcends and overcomes all earthly suffering, but also makes him creative. Rilke puts it trenchantly: “The artist is eternity, which intrudes into the days” (Rilke, 1994, p. 24).

The necessity of the principle of individuation

After this brief excursus on the conception of the Orpheus-poet Rilke, a major difference to the Orpheus-poet Werfel can be noted. Both poets emphasise a kind of inwardness, which is the ability to melt an alien world, the environment, into the self in order to master it from within. The decisive difference lies in the recognition of the principle of individuation as a mediator. Rilke’s Orpheus appears to be a glorifier of existence who shatters the spell of individuation in order to show man the way to the Dionysian innermost core of things. This dissolution is to be achieved by the work of art for the viewer and the poet himself. Nietzsche writes in the second preface to *The Birth of Tragedy*: “Indeed, the entire book recognises only an artist-thought and artist-after-thought behind all occurrences, – a God, if you will, but certainly only an altogether thoughtless and unmoral artist-God] (Nietzsche, 2003, p. 17).

Certainly, Nietzsche’s artist metaphysics also recognizes the Apollonian, which strives for unambiguity in perspective and sees in the Dionysian advance to the innermost core of things a realization that discovers its essential equality with the things behind the world of beautiful appearances. Ultimately, however, with a view to Rilke’s idiosyncratic reception of Nietzsche, it remains to be considered that the attachment to the moment excludes any kind of pre-stabilized truths. Finally, truth can only be achieved in concrete manifestations of a zeitgeist. Is that enough to counteract a catastrophic triumph of realism? The aestheticization of reality without moral standards and the anaesthetization of the artist himself do not seem far away here. For even if Rilke’s Orpheus does not collectively catch his self after the principle of individuation is shattered, the resulting selflessness is the breeding ground for instrumental heteronomy.

Werfel also seems to recognize this when he states that the “Luciferian-Promethean attempt to make the here and now autonomous in relation to God” (Werfel, 1975, p. 20) represents the greatest danger of all. Werfel’s inwardness, which protects us from the standardized brains of realism, also achieves its explosive power through the moral-religious subordination of the creature to the Creator. The practice of inwardness by the individual, as growth from the bottom up, as it were, is the guarantee that the ego is not oppressed. In this way, it cannot fall prey to what Werfel calls the

demon spirit or evil spirit. In the last novel, *Stern der Ungeborenen* [Star of the Unborn] published in 1946), this aesthetic-ethical criticism of the real mind is summarized in a philosophical-historical image. It is a scene from the eleventh chapter in which a priest wants to use an exorcism to find out whether the novel's protagonist, F. W., is an evil spirit. The priest asks:

“Do you cling to the philosophers who call themselves positivists because they are convinced of nothing but the great negative, to Auguste Comte and Spencer, to Schopenhauer, the denier of God out of pique, and to the rebel Nietzsche, who from beginning to end, tearing and raving as he will, is forged on the cross of the Crucified with iron chains, which is why he is called the chain dog of Christ, who barks at the faithful, - do you even pray to that Stefan George, and his name stands for all calligraphers bursting with lust for power, who, instead of wearing sackcloth and ashes, walk around with heavily puffed skirts, puffed ties and false Dante heads, turning their shoulders and hips, publicly making a sick boy toy a saviour and passing around the tinny poverty of spirit in precious vessels, while those seduced by them end up in the yarn of the crudest and bloodiest of all devils” (Werfel, 2010, p. 270).

As expected, F. W. denies these ways of thinking and acting. In this excerpt, three interwoven motifs can be found that we have already encountered in Werfel's essays: the self-alienation of man through realism, here in the form of positivism, the delusion of wanting to escape moral standards through the negation of God and the threat to man through false authority, here in the form of Stefan George's aesthetic idolization. What they all have in common is that they seek to realise their order through utopian drafts in which no consideration is given to the individual. In Werfel's works, we repeatedly encounter such figures who teach and practise an identity of power and realism: The psychiatrist in the tragedy *Schweiger* (published 1922), Dr Grauh in the novel fragment *Schwarze Messe* [Black Mass] (published 1919), the real historical figure of Enver Pasha in *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* and the animator in *Star of the Unborn*. What they have in common is a factual belief that excludes any form of individual apart from themselves: “They drive people together as numbers, they help from the height of their bureaucracy in order to get rid of the obligation to help other human lives with their human lives” (Werfel, 1975, p. 568). This already foreshadows the most striking manifestation of the relationship between power and realism: In genocidal events, the individual human being is just a number that is inserted into a ledger of utopian colouring. In these moments of history, Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor triumphs with his redemption, which takes place outside of man, always concretely, just like the forms of nationalism and communism criticised by Werfel. Such forms of redemption are always revolutionary in their dynamics and are rejected by Werfel in favour of the resistant, vertical experience of the principle of individuation: “The world has forgotten, above the old barren parliamentary geography of right and left, that there is above and below” (Werfel, 1975, p. 61).

Conclusion

We have shown that Franz Werfel created an oeuvre at a time of extreme political violence in order to write poetically against it. The poet offers a way to survive in these hard times. The evil spirits in his work are continuously contrasted with characters who have already realized Werfel's demand for inwardness – such as the steadfast Barbara in *Barbara oder die Frömmigkeit* [Barbara or the Piety] (published 1929) and Johannes Lepsius in *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* – or who realize it in the course of the fictional events, such as Lala in *The Star of the Unborn*. In this sense, we can hope with Werfel that at all times there is the possibility of turning away from realism in favor of morally enforced inwardness, the appreciation of the individual. The Orpheus-poet Werfel has created an oeuvre for this purpose, with which he writes against the mortal danger of inwardness through realism.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflict of interests in this research.

Ethical standards

The author affirms this research does not involve human subjects.

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**ՖՐԱՆՑ ՎԵՐՖԵԼԸ ՈՐՈՇԵՍ ՄՇԱԿՈՒԹԱՅԻՆ ՔՆՆԱԴԱՏ.
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ԲԱՐՈՑԱԳԵՂԱԳԻՏԱԿԱՆ ԽՆԴԻՐԸ**

Ռոյ Կնոքե

Իր «Մուսա լեռան քառասուն օրը» ստեղծագործությամբ Ֆրանց Վերֆելը հայ ժողովրդին նվիրված գրական հուշարձան է ստեղծել: Ավելի քիչ հայտնի են նրա մշակութային-քննադատական-փիլիսոփայական խոհագրությունները, որոնք Վերֆելը որպես դասախոսություններ է կարդացել 1930-ականներին՝ «Մուսա լեռան քառասուն օրը» վեպի համատեքստում: Այդ տեքստերը գիտական նմուշներ են, թեև հաճախ առանց հղումների կամ պարզ փաստարկների: Դրանք արտահայտում են բանաստեղծի նկատմամբ Վերֆելի բարոյական պահանջները խնդրին անդրադառնալով կոմունիզմի, ֆաշիզմի և ցեղասպանության ժամանակաշրջանում: Խնդրի բարոյագեղագիտական նկարագրին հաջորդում են Վերֆելի՝ բանաստեղծների ուղղած սոցիալ-քննադատական դիտարկումները, որոնք հակադրվում են Ռայներ Մարիա Ռիլկեի մոտեցումներին:

Բանալի բառեր՝ *Հայոց ցեղասպանություն, Ֆրանց Վերֆել, կոմունիզմ, ֆաշիզմ, միջպատերազմյան ժամանակաշրջան, Ռայներ Մարիա Ռիլկե, Օրփեոս:*