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## Driesch # 10: Martin Zehr: Gravity of the Personal Universe

Martin Zehr: Heimat: Gravity of the Personal Universe

Where you come from is gone, where you thought you were going to never was there, and where you are is no good unless you can get away from it.

Flannery O'Connor

I have always regarded card houses as the only dwellings worthy of mankind.

Gunter Grass

Again,  
writing outside the limits of my German-language expertise, I am challenged to consider a concept which, nonetheless, has a ring of familiarity sufficient for discussion across linguistic boundaries. The nuances of the German-born concept may have escaped me, but it is also evident that this is not an entirely national, or regional concept; it has aspects of universally-held beliefs and psychological forces which render analysis worthwhile regardless of its origins.

Although  
Heimat has no straightforward English translation, it appears to denote or signify a relatively permanent bond between the individual, the place of his or her identified geographic origin, and the effects of remembered childhood experiences which tie the person to this particular site in the physical universe. Heimat is a more complex concept than the rough English equivalent, homeland, which, strictly speaking, can be

fully defined by reference to one's birthplace or the region in which childhood experiences occur. Unlike Heimat, the inclusion of an emotional association is optional when speaking of a homeland. Heimat, on the other hand, is laden with positive associations, including safety, and comfort, and seems more akin to the Arabic term, bayt, as used by the writer Nada Bakri, in her recent book *House of Stone*. Here, bayt is used as a combination substitute for home, family, and comfort, conjuring up an image, for American readers, of the romantic nostalgia of a 1930s painting by the illustrator Norman Rockwell, one in which an archetypal middle-class family can be seen, smiling and comfortably-seated, around the flickering embers of a fireplace in their country home, with the living room window revealing the cold, snowy evening in the world outside. In the United States, at least, the power of this saccharin image of Heimat is indisputable, having, over the last century, launched the purchases of millions of greeting cards. For those of us who are adept at reconstructing our childhoods, in other words, most of us, Heimat, viewed from this perspective, is a magnet to which we are drawn in later life at times when uncertainty, disorientation and despair cry out for a reprieve, a return to the "remembered" time of safety and comfort in our Heimat cocoons. Heimat in this example is our personal myth, based on a combination of facts and desires, an invention with the potential to create dependence as powerful as any form of drug-induced sabbatical from a harsh reality. Heimat, in this personal sense, is the functional compass on which we can rely when the stresses and traumas of everyday existence accumulate and conspire to render us rootless, totally disoriented, "crazy," or "mad." If religion is our societal or cultural opiate, Heimat is a personal sedative, a potent reminder of a pleasanter world in the past, and, therefore, a reminder of the possibility of a better world in the indefinite future.

The combined geographic and psychological aspects of Heimat have the effect of exerting a strong pull, and Heimat can be viewed as a magnet, or North Pole, its attraction increasing in direct proportion to our temporal and geographic separation, so that, the farther we are in a literal sense from our imagined or constructed Heimat, the greater its felt loss or absence. Of course, this observation is only credible under the assumption that our individual Heimat has a comforting, reassuring valence, an assumption which is only valid where selective memory or powers of imagination have created, sustained, or enhanced our happy Heimat despite any contradictory evidence available for review and digestion, should we choose.

For those of a psychoanalytic bent, the ultimate personal Heimat, i.e., the time and place associated with the greatest margin of reliable safety and comfort, is the original "homeland" that is, the maternal womb-world with boundaries impervious to threat, anxiety, or the awareness of either. The post-natal, "real-world" Heimat may be a poor substitute, but it is the only one for which most of us have a vision, constructed or imagined, based on a broadly-based awareness. The comparison with psychoanalytic ideas is, however, useful, if only because it underscores both the universality of the concept of Heimat, its powerful attraction and its mythic qualities.

Heimat is a flexible, constructed, and portable construct, despite its linkage to an original time and place. It is also susceptible to the effects of denial and embellishment, such that, in situations in which time and geography separate the individual from the original Heimat, its comforts can be magnified and exaggerated without the contradiction of evidence, and its pains and sorrows minimized, submerged below the level of conscious awareness, requiring outside reminders to bring them back.

### Because

it is a psychological construct, it can be transported, despite its supposed roots in a particular setting. As I write this, from Hawaii, where I've come for a few days' time in connection with a family matter, I can recall a time, well into my adulthood, when I had no desire to visit a place I imagined to be nothing more than island supports for clusters of high-rise tourist hotels hugging Waikiki beaches. Now, years later, after acquiring first-hand knowledge that this entrenched image is only partially true, I have a sense of being in an adopted homeland, enhanced by the fact of my acquired family ties to these islands. My internalized notions of Heimat have expanded to accommodate another outpost in the physical universe.

### There

is also a dark side to the concept of Heimat which is attributable to its flexibility. The emotional attachment to homeland, perhaps its most important component, was conscripted by the National Socialists in the 1930s into the Blut und Erde sloganeering of the Third Reich, bolstering their fascist ideology. This expansion of the concept of Heimat added to its supposed quality of attachment the rejection of things considered foreign, die Ausländern, whether residing within or without the borders of the Reich. The linking of the Heimat to the German-speaking Volk, a romanticized aspect nurtured by the Nazis, is evident in the demanded allegiance to "Ein Reich, Ein Volk, Ein Führer," the holy trinity of the regime.

### This

link was used to expand the notion of Heimat to the larger conception of the Nation-Heimat, and this, in turn, is one of the explicit rationales for literal expansion, in 1938, through the Anschluss, and the incorporation of the German-speaking Sudetenland. The fulfillment of the need for the innocent-sounding Lebensraum can be seen, in conjunction with other aspects of the madness of the Nazi regime, as the impetus for annexation of the remainder of Czechoslovakia and, finally, the crossing of the Polish border in September, 1939, which would, ultimately, result in the destruction of the "1,000-year" Reich and, as a byproduct, the demise of this particular use of Heimat. Post-war use of the term Heimat in Germany appears more limited in scope, e.g., as a basis for an attachment to nature, or, in geographic terms, the provincial identification as Berliners, Bavarians, Swabians or Prussians.

### In

this country (United States) the reliance and power of its own variation of Heimat can be seen in its history. The first waves of European settlers along the Atlantic coastal regions were impelled to make the ocean crossing by their dreams of a created Heimat, absent the political, economic and religious oppression experienced in their respective Heimats of origin. Westward expansion in the nineteenth century, eventually to the Pacific ocean, was implicitly endorsed by the religious-sounding doctrine of "manifest destiny," the idea that the "natural" boundaries of the new nation, for its immigrant settlers and explorers, included all the territory between the waters, the imagined Heimat made reality by migration. Of course, this expansion was accompanied by the destruction, and extermination, of the Heimat of Native Americans, whose attachment to and claim to the land was at least as strong as that of the waves of immigrant-invaders.

### The

American Civil War, the most self-destructive chapter in this nation's history, can be viewed as a clash of Heimats. On the one hand, Southerners had an attachment to a plantation-based aristocracy built on ingrained dependence on the institution of slavery. The Heimat of Northerners included the assumption of an industrial, commercial society which rejected the notion of a right of one human being to own another. The American writer Mark Twain, with only little exaggeration, implicitly acknowledged the power of Heimat when he charged the Scottish writer, Sir Walter Scott, with causing the war through novels like *Ivanhoe*, popular in the South in part because of their romanticism of a medieval system akin to that in the agrarian South.

The idea of Nation-Heimat is also sufficiently flexible to be experienced, not exclusively as an attachment to a romanticized past, or as a present motivator for immediate migration or emigration, but as a future myth. Consider the Biblical Moses, leading the Israelites out of Egypt to the "promised land"; a years-long journey to a Heimat that some of the trekkers would never experience except as an image or idea. The modern reprisal of this same Heimat, generated by the nineteenth-century Zionism of Theodor Herzl, served as a strong motivator for refugees, a half-century later, to populate a region most of them had never seen. In the founding of the Nation-Heimat of Israel in 1948, the idea of Heimat has been explicitly stretched to include, not only cultural and historic connections to the past, but allegiance to a single, state religion.

#### Continued

survival of the idea of the Nation-Heimat underlies current consideration of creating a *Recht auf die Heimat* (Spanish: *derecho a la patria*; French: *droit au foyer*; English: right of return) in international law. This idea, spurred in part by the desire of Palestinians to return to their land of origin, the Heimat occupied within the borders of modern Israel, has been gaining acceptance as a fundamental human right critical to the exercise of the right of self-determination. The clash of the personal Heimat with the idea of the Nation-Heimat should, however, lead to caution regarding the uncritical adoption of such a universal right, given the distortion of Heimat in recent history and the unresolved turmoil of the unending battle of Heimats in the Middle East. Such a course is fraught with peril, when we go beyond discussion of the rights of individuals, if nations attempt to write the definitions and requirements of what are likely to be self-serving conceptions of Heimat, using it as the ultimate geopolitical excuse.

#### The

personal Heimat can be a powerful, impelling force, but the capacity to reject or sever the ties to Heimat is sometimes a vital prerequisite to the possibility of personal growth, especially when the original Heimat is seen as hostile, restrictive, or even persecuting. The successive waves of immigrants to the United States since its founding is testimony to this capacity, to the ability to follow the course of a constructed, dream image Heimat. The writer Pico Iyer believes that "Home is whatever you can rebel against"; a sentiment that can be applied as well to the Heimat. Thus, Heimat can be a metaphorical tether to a time and place which becomes a source of comfort and stability, or, conversely, a chain to a controlling, aversive environment that restrains the individual and must be broken before the individual can achieve the possibility of more. The personal Heimat, after all, is in our minds, and not our geography. Like tent stakes pulled from the earth in the process of relocating a camp, Heimat is mobile.

Literature, naturally, is replete with examples of the strong, and at times, misguided. pull of Heimat. The writer Thomas Wolfe, in his best-known novel, *You Can't Go Home Again*, summarizes the sometimes false nostalgia of Heimat for the person separated by time and distance from its original source:

You can't go back home to your family, back home to your childhood... back home to a young man's dreams of glory and of fame... back home to places in the country, back home to the old forms and systems of things which once seemed everlasting but which are changing all the time- back home to the escapes of Time and Memory.

Wolfe's insight underscores the insight of being disappointed when a long-held feeling of Heimat, nourished by years of re-imagining, relied on as an anchor of stability and comfort in times of stress and separation, is exposed to the inevitable changes of its setting.

Anyone who has returned to a hometown from which they've been separated for a reunion of classmates from another time likely has experienced some of this feeling, based on the clash of memory with a new reality.

The fact of possible, if not probable, disappointment in comparing the Heimats of now and then has not, of course, inhibited writers who use the original source as inspiration, finding that this Heimat, regardless of its present validity, continues to exert a strong hold on memory. The writer Ursula Hegi, who was born in Dusseldorf just after the Second World War, emigrated to the United States at the age of eighteen and, according to her, was embarrassed to tell others that she was German. Her first two novels were set in the United States, but she did not experience a large measure of success until she wrote *Floating in My Mother's Palm* (1990) and *Stones from the River* (1994), both with settings in the fictional German town of Burgdorf. Acknowledging the continued pull of her past in her writing, she observed:

I still really believed you can leave your country of origin behind and start your life anew. The older I get, the more I realize you can't do that.

Hegi is hardly alone in this realization. Two other "American" writers, Willa Cather and Mark Twain, exemplify the reliance on a long-ago, far-distant childhood Heimat as inspiration for some of their best

writing. In Cather's case, Red Cloud, Nebraska, a small farming town on the plains, was the Heimat-inspiration for *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Antonia* (1918). More famously, the sleepy Mississippi river town of Hannibal, Missouri was the primal source for Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and his masterpiece, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885). In the latter case, it should be noted that Twain was hardly susceptible to a wholesale romanticized version of his childhood; Huck Finn is as noteworthy for its ironic, humorous critique of antebellum plantation life and its unclouded portrayal of racism and slavery as it is for its evocation of small town childhood. In all three of the above examples, moreover, the authors notably did not avail themselves of the opportunity to return to the site of the original Heimat, hundreds or thousands of miles and decades in the distance, thereby insuring that present realities would not intrude into their remembered attachments.

The strong hold exerted by a personal or national Heimat is a feature which it shares with another ineffable, faith-driven perspective of a relation to the universe, namely, religion. Most religions have in common with the idea of Heimat the psychological-emotional attachment to a set of beliefs or perceptions which can serve the function of providing a sense of comfort, structure and permanence in a world otherwise experienced as a source of stress and uncertainty. Heimat and religion combine elements of myth, ritual and selective interpretation of outside evidence, and both, implicitly, incorporate notions of the *Auslandern*, which, if viewed as a threat, can justify conflict with those defined as outside the boundaries of the respective realms.

The recent renewal of interest in personal genealogy can also be seen to provide some of the purported benefits of Heimat and religion, and, in some aspects, appears to be a contemporary substitute for the personal Heimat. In modern societies genealogy can be viewed as a substitute attempt to construct Heimat in a mobile world where staying in one place is less and less common. Certainly, the availability of DNA analysis, allowing the tracing of ancestors back as far as African origins, has facilitated the pursuit of this interest, but this development alone does not explain the popularity of genealogical family investigations. Where place is less fixed, the construction, or reconstruction, of a personal family tree in which one is, by definition, a member, can provide a sense of place and belonging with the side benefits of perceived structure, stability and comfort to be found in the more traditional conception of Heimat. Implicit in the tracing of families, tribes and clans, however, is the assumption of boundaries beyond which the *Auslandern* dwell, another facet of genealogy which argues for it as another method of finding/creating Heimat. In genealogy, however, the analogy is, inevitably faulty, since, inevitably, according to evolutionary theory, we are all linked to a common ancestor. This "defect" in the supposed connection between Heimat and genealogy turns out, however, to be ultimately illuminating, since, in order to envision and/or accept the concept of a Heimat linked to specific times, peoples, languages and customs, we must forget, deny or minimize the truth that, as members of the same species, *Homo Sapiens* is characterized more by similarities than differences, ultimately, e.g., physical and emotional needs. All members of this tribe need and crave

comfort and security, and Heimat, like genealogy, like religion, can provide that illusion, for an individual or, collectively, in a national consciousness.

The nuances of the German-language concept of Heimat may not be accessible to this

writer, but, despite the linguistic challenges of translation, Heimat appears to be a more or less universal idea, serving functions common to all individuals, in personal and collective forms.

Heimat is a portable, malleable, and flexible concept, one that can serve as an anchor of comfort, stability and a sense of belonging, or, like an anchor, as a dead weight, a restricting, constricting attachment that must be broken as a prelude to growth. Heimat, like gravity, is not visible, but surrounds us and is always there, always affecting us, excepting that awareness of its purposes and mechanisms may allow us to alter, minimize, or even escape the effects of this personal gravity.