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Hans Sahl, Dramatist

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The state of Hans Sahl's dramatic production

Hans Sahl¹ (1902-1993) seems to emerge onto the literary scene of German exile literature with the reserve of a poorly illuminated portrait. Over the last few decades his name has generally appeared only in the margins of studies on the most noted exponents of *Exilliteratur* – exponents with whom Sahl shared a destiny, experiences, routes, and stations of life – and thus continues to linger with the labile lines of a silhouette; it is time for research to give it substance, color, and outline. For, in fact, the number of studies dedicated to Sahl remains rather scant. In 1994, one year after the author's death, Momme Brodersen lamented on the one hand the belated interest in Sahl and his work within Germany and, on the other, the absence of any form of reception at all within Italy:

Hans Sahl ist hier in Italien völlig unbekannt. Sein Name ist allenfalls in den Fußnoten irgendwelcher Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der deutschen Exilliteratur zu finden. Interpretationen seiner Werke aber oder Übersetzungen seiner Gedichte [...] sucht man vergebens.²

Mutatis mutandis, in spite of being written almost twenty years ago, Brodersen's words are still relevant today and the panorama about the same: in Italy Sahl remains unknown, while in Germany his reception continues to suffer from a certain fragmentariness. It would not be unreasonable to speculate that the absence of both an ex-

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¹ The Italian translation of Sahl's three collections of poetry is from 2014. Hans Sahl, "*Mi rifiuto di scrivere un necrologio per l'uomo*". *Poesie*, trans. and edited by Nadia Centorbi (Rome: Del Vecchio, 2014).

² Momme Brodersen, *Schreiben nach Auschwitz: Hans Sahl*, in "Exil. Forschung. Erkenntnisse. Ergebnisse", XIV (1994), n. 2, pp. 5-12, here p. 5.



tensive biographical reconstruction³ as well as a critical-historical edition of his writings has hindered the range of scholars' interest, even those exponents of *Exilforschung* who could have contributed in a more profound manner to the "rediscovery" of an anything but marginal representative of such literature.

Although a substantial corpus of studies on the author does not exist, there have been some notable contributions. Ackermann and Brodersen's edition⁴ of Sahl's bibliography is an excellent point of reference in the production of an author lacking a critical edition; so are the contributions of the Frankfurter magazine "Exil" – to which Sahl did not hesitate to offer suggestions and encouragement⁵ – which from its very beginnings and throughout the course of its thirty year operation dedicated a lot of space to the author. And even if Sahl has received some recent attention within the field of *Exilforschung* – in as much as a "lebendes Memorial" and "letzter Zeuge" to the catastrophe which contributed to the diaspora of the greatest of the German intelligentsia under Nazism –, enough attention still has not been paid to his literary production. It is lamentable that no studies have focused on a textual analysis of Sahl's work, and there has been an inexplicable amount of neglect as regards the files of his legacy. Sahl's legacy is an undeniably essential source of material for an author whose works published in his lifetime represent only a small part of his intense writing activity. The diaries, letters, poetry

³ Erich Wolfgang Skwara's biographical reconstruction – *Hans Sahl. Leben und Werk* (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 1986) – invalidated by serious inaccuracies as well as Sahl's extreme reservations – is insufficient in its attempts to trace the author's essential development. Sahl's two volumes of memoirs written at the end of his life, on the contrary, are invaluable. Cfr. *Hans Sahl, Memoiren eines Moralisten* (Zurich: Ammann, 1983); throughout the rest of this examination we shall quote from the second edition (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1985) and Hans Sahl, *Das Exil im Exil* (Frankfurt a.M.: Luchterhand, 1990).

⁴ Cfr. *Hans Sahl. Eine Bibliographie seiner Schriften*, edited by Gregor Ackermann and Momme Brodersen (Marbach am Neckar: Deutsche Schillergesellschaft, 1995).

⁵ Demonstrated by the partially published correspondence between Sahl and the editors of "Exil", the couple Joachim and Edita Koch. Cfr. Edita Koch, *In der Fremde die Heimat suchen. Hans Sahl im Briefwechsel mit den Gründern der Zeitschrift "Exil"*, in "Exil. Forschung. Erkenntnisse. Ergebnisse", XXX (2010), n. 2, pp. 5-10.



manuscripts, short stories, and dramatic sketches contained in the archives at Marbach await not only a published edition that will preserve them from the terrible state of conservation in which they reside (the diaries in particular require immediate publication due to their fragility and the danger that threatens them with every new consultation), but require precisely that attention which has consistently been lacking. There are, however, two notable exceptions: Reiter's studies⁶ – distinguished by their numerous citations of the archival files – and the more recent introduction to Sahl's cinematographic writings edited by Oelze,⁷ which is also rich in valuable references to the archival material.

In addition to the sheer number of articles of theatrical, cinematographic, and literary criticism from his intense journalistic activity,⁸ Sahl is the author of an oratorio (*Jemand*, 1938), a novel (*Die Wenigen und die Vielen*, 1959), two volumes of memoirs (*Memoiren eines Moralisten*, 1983 and *Das Exil im Exil*, 1990), three collections of poetry (*Die hellen Nächte. Gedichte aus Frankreich*, 1942; *Wir sind die Letzten*, 1976; *Wir sind die Letzten. Der Maulwurf*, 1991), three plays (*Hausmusik. Eine Szenenfolge*, 1980; *Die Inselfahrt. Eine ernste Komödie*, 1990; *Rubinstein oder der Bayreuther Totentanz*, 1990) and various short story collections (*Umsteigen nach Babylon*, 1987; *Der Tod des Akrobaten*, 1992). Though his name was anything but unknown to the post-war generation as a *Vermittler* between American and German culture, at times as a translator of American authors (Thornton Wilder, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams), at other times as a cultural correspondent for va-

⁶ Cfr. Andrea Reiter, *Die Exterritorialität des Denkens. Hans Sahl im Exil* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2007). Among articles by the same author above all see: *Doppelte Verbannung. Politisches Renegatentum im Exil*, in *Deutschsprachige Exilliteratur seit 1933*, edited by John Spalek (Bern: Francke, 2003), vol. III/4, pp. 469-499; *Hans Sahl im Pariser Exil*, in *Fluchtziel Paris. Die deutschsprachige Emigration 1933-1945*, edited by Anne Saint Sauveur-Henn (Berlin: Metropol, 2002), pp. 230-241.

⁷ Cfr. Ruth Oelze, "Über Hans Sahl. 'Kritik ist schöpferische Kunst'", in *Hans Sahl Filmkritiker. Mit Kritiken und Aufsätzen von Hans Sahl*, edited by Rolf Aurich and Wolfgang Jacobsen (Munich: edition text + kritik, 2012), pp. 13-73.

⁸ Only a few essays and articles were collected in the volume: Hans Sahl, "Und doch...". *Essays und Kritiken aus zwei Kontinenten*, edited by Klaus Blanc (Frankfurt a.M.: Luchterhand, 1991).



rious German language newspapers (“Die Welt”, “Neue Zürcher Zeitung”, “Süddeutsche Zeitung”), as a writer, poet, and dramatist Sahl did not elicit a great amount of interest. Even scholars’ attention has been limited to only a few of the aspects of his production (namely, the essays, poetry, and memoirs). As regards his dramatic production in particular research contributions are mostly nonexistent. Other than the new edition of the oratorio *Jemand* edited by Ackermann and Brodersen,⁹ which has been enhanced by documents and a detailed introduction, there have been no examinations of the archival material or studies of the published plays.¹⁰

At the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach where Sahl’s entire legacy is contained in approximately sixty boxes¹¹ – for the most part well catalogued and accessible to the scholar – all of the work archived under the title of “Dramatisches” is divided into two macro-sections. In the first are contained the manuscripts, typescripts, and documentary material related to the three dramas which the author published in his lifetime in the form of copies:¹² *Hausmusik*, *Die Inselfahrt*, and *Rubinstein*. To the second belong various typescripts, many of which are incomplete, that can be ascribed to the dramatic genre *stricto et lato sensu*. I shall examine a number of the published dramatic texts as well as the archival files which up until now have not been examined and which demonstrate a dedication to the dramatic genre on Sahl’s part that is anything but accidental. As a first step I believe it is important to trace a portrait of the dramatic works and the state of the archives related to them.

⁹ Cfr. Hans Sahl, *Jemand*, edited by Gregor Ackermann and Momme Brodersen (Berlin: Bostelmann & Siebenharr, 2003).

¹⁰ An attempt at such an investigation is offered by Bernhard Spies’ brief study, *Hans Sahl’s Dramen. Die Suche nach dem unbekanntem jüdischen Ich*, in *Integration und Ausgrenzung. Studien zur deutsch-jüdischen Literatur- und Kulturgeschichte von den Frühen Neuzeit bis zur Gegenwart*, edited by Mark Gelber (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2009), pp. 415-428.

¹¹ On the various phases of Marbach’s acquisition of Sahl’s legacy, see Andrea Reiter’s timely reconstruction, *Die Ordnung des Archivs: Hans Sahl im Deutschen Literaturarchiv*, in “Exil. Forschung. Erkenntnisse. Ergebnisse”, XXVIII (2008), n. 1, pp. 5-16.

¹² As a *Büchleinmanuskript* the text of the three plays was edited by the Stephani Hunzinger Bühnenverlag of Bad Homburg. Cfr. *Hans Sahl. Eine Bibliographie*, cit., pp. 28 and 30.



To the good fortune of both the state of the archives and *Jemand*, there exists a vast and detailed exploration in the republication of the oratorio edited by Ackermann and Brodersen, which, however, we shall here limit ourselves only to mentioning.¹³ As regards the dramas *Hausmusik* and *Rubinstein*, the archival files provide a variegated and rich portrait. *Hausmusik* was published in 1980 as a *Büchlein* by the Stefani Hunzinger Bühnenverlag of Bad Homburg and carried the subtitle *Eine Szenefolge*. From that point on, in contrast to the collections of poetry, the memoirs, and the novel – all of which have been recently republished by Munich's Luchterhand – the drama has not been republished or staged, and as a result the text printed from the copy is even considered a rarity in German libraries. The play was first staged the year preceding its publication and amounted to a reading by young actors during the Berliner Festwoche in September 1979. Its *Uraufführung* took place in English at the Jewish Theatre of New York in 1981, whereas it was staged in Germany only in 1984 (Südostbayerisches Städtetheater Landshut-Passau-Straubing). Discoveries in the archives at Marbach include a notebook with handwritten annotations, a typescript with the English version (*House Music*) and a complete typescript free from corrections and with a subtitle that differs from the printed version: *Hausmusik. Szenen einer Kindheit*.¹⁴ As regards the drama *Rubinstein oder der Bayreuther Totentanz. Eine Antiope in zwei Akten*, published in 1990 in copy form by the same publishing house in Bad Homburg – it too in its original edition and increasingly more difficult to find – there also exists miscellaneous archival material. The material consists of two typescripts (one of which is marked by major handwritten corrections); a typescript of the English version; two files containing a great amount of research material on the pianist Joseph Rubinstein; and a remarkable number of letters demonstrating an articulate correspondence aimed at the retrieval of material for a precise reconstruction of the pianist's biography.¹⁵

¹³ Cfr. Hans Sahl, *Jemand*, cit., pp. 11-26 and 91-154.

¹⁴ DLA-Marbach/A:Sahl/Dramatisches/Hausmusik.

¹⁵ DLA-Marbach/A:Sahl/Dramatisches/Rubinstein oder der Bayreuther Totentanz; the two files containing the material and correspondence: DLA-Marbach/A:Sahl/Dramatisches/Rubinstein/Materialien, darunter Briefe/Mappe I/II.



The second macrosection of archival material to be considered consists of various unpublished papers, which demonstrate an intense amount of dramatic writing and which span an arc of almost fifty years (1936-1980), writing that otherwise might be overlooked in an examination of the author's dramatic work. The papers in the archive related to the aforementioned section can be organized into three principal groups.¹⁶ Belonging to the first group are the typescripts of two texts undoubtedly conceived for the theatre: *Hitler* (of uncertain date, incomplete, but whose internal elements suggest that it was most likely conceived between 1941 and 1945); *Die FüÙe der Anderen* (of uncertain date, a play of only one act, probably dating to the 1960s). Belonging to the second group are the typescripts of three texts conceived as radio dramas: *Gegen den Sturm* (of uncertain date, a play of only one act, dating most likely to somewhere between 1941 and 1945); *Die Geschichte des vierten Weissen aus Morgenland* (of uncertain date, text complete, most certainly conceived of in the United States as suggested by the use of English in the musical notation); *Ein amerikanischer Sommer* (of uncertain date, incomplete, but whose internal elements suggest a temporal connection to around the end of the 1960s – Sahl set the text on Long Island where he had bought a summer house after the birth of his son Marc Tobias in '64). Belonging to the third group are the typescripts of various cinematographic scripts, which do not belong to my argument.¹⁷ Occupying its own unique space,

¹⁶ The typescripts to which we are referring are archived under the title: DLA-Marbach/A:Sahl/Dramatisches/Komödien/Hörspiele/Filmexposé. In addition to the unpublished works, the section consists of two lightly corrected, complete typescripts of the comedy *Die Inselfahrt*.

¹⁷ The texts are written in prose and were conceived of as *exposés* for the cinema. They include: *Auktion* (an interesting experiment with talking film, in which the music would have taken precedence over the word); *Buchstabe J.* (a cinematic adaptation of the novella *Der letzte Sommer* by Ricarda Huch); *Dora Lee* (in English in collaboration with Edward Robert); *Der eingebildete Kranke* (an updating of Molière's comedy set in a sanatorium); *Die Grossherzogin von Gerolstein* (in collaboration with Allan Gray, an adaptation of the operetta by Meilhac & Halévy with music by Jaques Offenbach); "1000 Dollar Belohnung!" oder "Wer hat Mabel gerettet?" (a comedy of errors). Cfr. DLA Marbach/A:Sahl/ Dramatisches /Filmexposé.



however, is the text *Vincent, a Szenario für einen Film über Van Gogh*, a text I consider to be an intermedial mixture of theatre and cinema and therefore have excluded from the group of cinematographic scripts.

Keeping the archival files in mind, Sahl's dramatic works are both formally and thematically varied. In terms of their content, they are marked by the use of ever different themes, even if those themes are often connected to the author's existential and intellectual path: from the political drama of his debut (*Jemand*) – well within the tradition of *Agitprop-Kunst*, and a mirror of Sahl's personal convictions before his turn toward an idea of a humanitarian socialism removed from Marxist dogma –, up through the dramas of his older years, which mainly concern his confrontation with his Jewish origins (*Hausmusik* and *Rubinstein*). Sahl's tendency toward psychological drama (*Vincent; Die Geschichte des vierten Weisen aus Morgenland; Hitler*) goes hand in hand with his re-elaboration of the experience of war (*Urlaub vom Tod*), exile (*Gegen den Sturm; Die Füße der Anderen*), and adaptation to American culture (*Ein amerikanischer Sommer*). Formally, the author demonstrates a great openness toward intermedial forms of *mise-en-scène* and montage: in addition to music, the dramatic action of the oratorio *Jemand* is conditioned by visual art, which, together with the cinematographic suggestions, occupies an indisputable leading position in his scenario on van Gogh. Various texts display the influence of cinematographic techniques; in particular, Sahl takes inspiration from montage in scenic sequence (*Szenenfolge*) and in this fashion constructs the majority of his dramas. The influence of the radiophonic medium is also considerable and Sahl tried his hand at various radio dramas, demonstrating an awareness of how to exploit the various formal strategies imposed by the genre.

As we shall see, however, above all it is the cinema that influences the author's dramatic work the most. As a film critic in the 1920s for "Das Tage-Buch" and the "Montag Morgen", Sahl acquired an undisputed competence in the field of the new art early on, and particularly admired its immense possibilities of being combined with the higher arts:



Der Film war eine junge Kunst, es war so jung wie wir, er wuchs mit uns, und wir wuchsen an ihm; wir schufen ihn und interpretierten ihn zugleich, wir setzten Maßstäbe, wir stellten Kategorien auf, wir kämpften um seine Gleichberechtigung mit den anderen bildenden Künsten, mit der Literatur, der Musik, der Malerei.¹⁸

Hence the influence of the cinematographic techniques in the prose works and dramas. The *Collagetechnik* of film conditioned, in fact, not only the *ductus* of the novel *Die Wenigen und die Vielen*, worked out in that fascinating “filmisches Erzählen”¹⁹ often remarked on by scholars, but also in the montage of different dramatic pieces through the use of the *Szenenfolge*.

Jemand: a Gesamtkunstwerk between Passionspiel and Agitprop-Theater

Leaving Germany in March 1933 and thereafter finding refuge in Prague for a number of months thanks to the help of his friend Max Brod, Sahl arrived in Zurich at the end of the same year together with Kurt Hirschfeld, the dramatist who around the Zürcher Schauspielhaus would gather together authors and actors forced, like him, into exile.²⁰ Encouraged by the various acquaintances he had soon established within the theatre world, Zurich would have been a clear choice for Sahl had it not been for the restrictive terms of its *Asylrecht* – already beginning in 1930 Switzerland had begun to deny residency permits to refugees without a job.²¹ Without definitive work prospects, Sahl obtained a residency permit for four months, which is the reason he soon ended up in France, living in Paris until 1940.

¹⁸ Hans Sahl, *Memoiren eines Moralisten*, cit., p. 99.

¹⁹ Ruth Oelze, *Über Hans Sahl. “Kritik als schöpferische Kunst”*, cit., p. 43.

²⁰ “Das Zürcher Schauspielhaus hat die Tradition des deutschen Theaters im Exil fortgesetzt, eines Theaters, das der Nationalsozialismus insofern usurpierte, als er die Massenregie Max Reinhardts, den Agitprop-Stil Piscators in den Dienst seiner Partei- und Massenaufmärsche stellte” (Hans Sahl, *Das Exil im Exil*, cit., p. 29).

²¹ Cfr. Frank Wende, *Deutschsprachige Schriftsteller im Schweizer Exil 1933-1950* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2002), p. 27 ff.



Between 1934 and 1938 he nevertheless kept in close contact with the climate of Zurich, traveling often between France and Switzerland: “Ich reiste zwischen Zürich und Paris hin und her, wohnte drei Monate im Hotel Helvetia in der Rue de Tournon [...] und drei Monate in der Pension Bickel in der Plattstraße”.²² These were the conditions in which the author completed his first work, *Jemand*, commissioned by Swiss Social Democrats for the *Arbeitersängerverband* as a *Festspiel* for the first of May.²³ Sahl worked on *Jemand* – begun in winter 1935-36 and staged in Zurich in March and July of 1938 – in secret, hidden in a country house in Küsnacht and under extremely precarious conditions:

Die Nächte waren so kalt, daß am Morgen das Wasser im Krug gefroren war, was mich zu den beiden Anfangszeilen in einem Song meines Chorwerks *Jemand* inspirierte: “Wenn die Nächte kälter werden und im Krug das Wasser gefriert...”²⁴

Although he had gained a certain notoriety as a critic thanks to the numerous articles on theatre, cinema, and literature he had published in progressive journals²⁵ (the *exploit* had been in 1926 with *Klassiker der Leihbibliothek*),²⁶ Sahl had left Germany without having established a name as a writer. “Schriftsteller noch ohne Werk”,²⁷ as opposed to other representatives of *Exilliteratur*, Sahl undertook

²² Hans Sahl, *Das Exil im Exil*, cit., p. 40.

²³ Sahl obtained the commission thanks to acquaintances connected to the Zürcher Schauspielhaus, to which the president the Swiss Social Democrats, Ernst Nobs, had turned when looking for someone to write a *Festspiel* for the first of May.

²⁴ Hans Sahl, *Das Exil im Exil*, cit., p. 56.

²⁵ For a reasoned description of Sahl’s non-fiction writing in the 1920s cfr. Robert Krause, *Berliner Kritiken. Hans Sahls journalistisches Frühwerk aus der Weimarer Republik*, in “Jahrbuch zur Kultur und Literatur der Weimarer Republik” (2009/2010), n. 13/14, pp. 29-52.

²⁶ Cfr. Hans Sahl, *Klassiker der Leihbibliothek* I-V, in “Und doch...”, cit., pp. 47-72. Published in “Das Tage-Buch” (between May and July 1926), Sahl’s article concentrates on the tendencies of contemporary popular literature and highlights the dangers of trivial literature full of resentment and revanchism.

²⁷ Benedikt Erenz, *Alles was Europa war. Zum Tode von Hans Sahl*, in “Jahrbuch der deutschen Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung” (1993), pp. 185-188, here p. 186.



the path of exile firm in his conviction of following a literary calling that remained to be demonstrated; between 1922 and 1933 his literary production had been limited to a few poems and short stories appearing here and there in newspapers and journals.²⁸ “Ex-territorialer Mensch”, “Gast in fremden Kulturen”, destined to sign “einen Pakt mit der Fremde”²⁹ which would last more than fifty years (the exile only returned to Germany in 1989), Sahl found a principle of exclusive identity³⁰ in the poetic word. Faithful to the idea of the “responsibility” of the word, writing for him was always at the service of a multifaceted political duty, one to which he adhered unequivocally, at times as a militant anti-Nazi, at others as a “lebendes Memorial”³¹ of a historical catastrophe that had to be preserved from oblivion. His desire to be “ein homme de lettres” was “eine Sache der Verantwortung”, firm as he was in his conviction that “dass Politik [nicht] nur für Politiker da sei” and that writing “auch wenn es Verse waren” was always “‘politisch’ gehalten – nämlich die Öffentlichkeit betreffend, die Gemeinschaft, die Gemeinde”.³²

This is the sense in which the oratorio *Jemand* should be understood, and it is reductive to confine it simply to the genre of *Agitprop*-

²⁸ Cfr. *Sahl-Bibliographie*, cit., pp. 36-107. Between 1922 and 1933 Sahl published six short stories: *Er, sie und ich* (1922); *Der Wohltäter* (1922); *Die Patronentasche* (1926); *Tragödie im Schlangenkäfig* (1926); *Herr Pilz lässt sich rasieren* (1928); *Warenhaus der Zeit* (1932). Seven poems appeared in the same amount of time: *An ein Gegenüber* (1923); *Zerwürfnis* (1924); *Drei Streitenden* (1925); *Das alte Gebäude* (1925); *Strophen an ein Kind* (1926); *Alter* (1927); *Berliner Elegie* (1928).

²⁹ Hans Sahl, *Gast in fremden Kulturen*, in “Und doch...”, cit., pp. 23-25, here p. 23.

³⁰ In an interview Sahl dramatically expressed his distance from his mother tongue: “Das klingt heute einfach: fliehen! [...] Aber wir hatten damals ganz bürgerliche Vorstellungen von der Kontinuität des Lebens und einer gesicherten Existenz. Und nun musste man plötzlich weg aus seiner Heimat. [...] Und was ich sonst hinter mir ließ? Mein Gott, die Sprache, die deutsche Sprache. Das war das Liebste, das war meine wahre Geliebte, meine Mutter”. Cfr. Gundolf Freyermuth, *Reise in die Verlorengegangenenheit. Auf den Spuren deutscher Emigranten (1933-1940)* (Hamburg: Rasch und Röhning, 1990), pp. 210-211.

³¹ Hans Sahl, *Die Ballade von den getragenen Sachen*, in *Wir sind die Letzten. Gedichte* (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1976), p. 72.

³² Hans Sahl, *Das Exil im Exil*, cit., p. 181.



Literatur. Sahl himself was well aware of the risk of being misunderstood.³³

Überhaupt besteht die Gefahr, daß der Jemand missverstanden wird. Das war nicht rein kommunistisch gedacht; ich würde das Stück heute auch anders schreiben als damals [...]. Das Stück war Ende 1936 fertig. Das war gerade die Zeit der Moskauer Schauprozesse. Die Revision meiner Position hat sich aber nicht so schnell abge- spielt. Die Vorbereitung, die Fragestellung war allerdings schon da.³⁴

Sahl's confrontation with communism, destined to shift into literary terms in the dialectic with Brecht, is not our present concern; nevertheless, it is useful to linger for a moment on the principal points of the matter. Having had communist sympathies from his youth, Sahl was forced by the deviations of Stalinism to radically reconsider his position. The ideological aspect of his shift toward a humanitarian socialism far removed from party ideology in turn brought him into a more difficult position of survival. Sahl's relationship with the circle of friends in exile who remained faithful to the party's ideology became strained, in fact, in the aftermath of his break with the *Schutzverband der Deutschen Schriftsteller im Exil*, which he had helped to found.³⁵ The *affaire* of his rupture with the SDS forced the author into greater isolation, eloquently expressed in the formula *Exil im Exil*, the title of the second volume of his memoirs. In his diary from 1938 one sometimes finds denunciations of the isolation of the *Renegat* (consider the quick and concise rhyming quip "allein sein kann nur ein Stein"),³⁶ at other times a declared and rather flamboyant intellectual pride, which tended to mirror that "Antikonformismus" and "undogmatische Haltung"³⁷

³³ When writing to Willi Schlamm in 1937 Sahl had already expressed himself in a critical fashion: "Ich habe dieses Oratorium vor zwei Jahren geschrieben; seitdem hat sich vieles verändert, und ich würde es heute gewiss anders schreiben" (cfr. Hans Sahl, *Jemand*, cit., p. 100).

³⁴ *Ivi*, pp. 104-105.

³⁵ Cfr. Hans Sahl, *Das Exil im Exil*, cit., pp. 60-64.

³⁶ DLA-Marbach, A:Sahl/Autobiographisches/Tagebücher/TB IVa.

³⁷ Momme Brodersen, *Schreiben nach Auschwitz*, cit., p. 6.



unwilling to bend to any kind of ideological compromise (one notes the quick line in capital letters: “Ich bin ein Narr der Aufrichtigkeit”).³⁸ The literary *facies* of his ideological shift becomes definitive in his drastic revision of the Brecht “myth”. Like many other young writers in the Weimar Republic, Sahl “entging auch Sahl nicht der Aura von Brechts Frühwerk”,³⁹ and Brecht would continue to permeate Sahl’s work even after his reconsideration of Brecht’s political vision. On various occasions, both in his poetry as well as his memoirs, Sahl remarked on his difficult relationship with the Brechtian universe. He had admired him as a youth, but soon began to favor a humanitarian socialism freed from the “kaltes”⁴⁰ dogmatism he had recognized in Brecht’s works. The “Enthumanisierung”⁴¹ he ascribed to Brecht, also quoted as “die Auskältung und Einfrostung der zwischenmenschlichen Beziehungen”,⁴² is the most important aspect of the conflict between Sahl and Marxist orthodoxy – on numerous pages of his diary we encounter the insistent question: “Ist der Marxismus für den Menschen oder die Menschen für den Marxismus?”⁴³ His confrontation with Ignazio Silone was fundamental, disappointed as he was by his youthful ideas of utopia. In *Vino e pane*,⁴⁴ – a “Katechismus für integrale Revolutionäre”,⁴⁵ – which he had amply commented upon in his diaries from 1938, Sahl identified not only a “Kommunion zwischen Christentum und Sozialismus”⁴⁶ that fit his sense of morality,⁴⁷

³⁸ DLA-Marbach, A:Sahl/Autobiographisches/Tagebücher/TB IVa.

³⁹ Andrea Reiter, *Die Exterritorialität des Denkens*, cit., p. 45.

⁴⁰ Hans Sahl, *Das Exil im Exil*, cit., p. 147.

⁴¹ Hans Sahl, *Memoiren eines Moralisten*, cit., p. 194.

⁴² Hans Sahl, *Das Exil im Exil*, cit., p. 147.

⁴³ DLA-Marbach, A:Sahl/Autobiographisches/Tagebücher/TB IVb.

⁴⁴ “*Brot und Wein* war ein pädagogisches Buch, das aus den Fehlern und Niederlagen der Vergangenheit die Richtlinien für eine Verinnerlichung und Vermenschlichung der revolutionären Bewegung bilden wollte” (Hans Sahl, *Das Exil im Exil*, cit., p. 59).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ DLA-Marbach, A:Sahl/Autobiographisches/Tagebücher/TB IVb.

⁴⁷ As A. Reiter accurately observes (*Die Exterritorialität des Denkens*, cit., p. 85): “Sahls humanistische Sorge um das Individuum ist begründet in einer Achtung des Menschen, die er oft in der Nähe von christlichem Gedankengut bringt. Dies war es auch, was er im Werk seines Freundes und Weggenossen Ignazio Silone bewunderte”.



but one of the most appropriate indications of the role of “persönliche Verantwortung”⁴⁸ within the context of mass ideology. And here one understands why Sahl defined *Jemand a posteriori* as “ein Dank an Brecht und ein Abschied von dem, was er für mich einmal bedeutet hatte”.⁴⁹

The clear inspiration he had taken from Brecht’s model tends to combine with the solemnity of the *Passionspiel* of sacred tradition. The coexistence of the rhetoric of propaganda, of Brecht’s *Lehrstücke*, and the tone of the sacred liturgy give *Jemand* its “humanitär-revolutionäres Pathos”⁵⁰ and frees the whole from the dullness of the traditional genre of the political *Festspiel*. In his memoirs⁵¹ Sahl offers a detailed portrait of the oratorio’s creation. The text was inspired by the twenty-five woodcuts from the Belgian painter Frans Masereel’s cycle “Die passion eines Menschen” (1918) in which he illustrated the life of a working-class man from birth to death, passing through the intermediate stations of hunger, prison, class struggle, and revolution. The black and white language of Masereel’s woodcuts find poetic expression in the individual frames of *Jemand*, which unfold in a series of choirs, *recitativi*, arias, and *Lieder* meant for a musical structure of great breadth, and realized with the help of Tibor Kacicz, the Hungarian composer who would sign it with the pseudonym of Viktor Halder. The poetic word, figurative art, and music trigger a process of intermediality based on the coexistence of three artistic languages. Furthermore, in the *Vorwort* to *Jemand* Sahl suggests that there is a hierarchy to their arrangement. The cycle of Masereel’s woodcuts functions as the pre-text to the oratorio and binds the word to a figurative dramatic scenario. The literary text is then considered a “Nachdichtung”⁵² which gives voice to the etchings’ “stumme[s] Schwarz-Weiß” in whose light and shadow Sahl discerns

⁴⁸ DLA-Marbach, A:Sahl/Autobiographisches/Tagebücher/TB IVb.

⁴⁹ Hans Sahl, *Man lebt immer “als ob”*. Ein Gespräch mit Fritz Raddatz, in “Und doch...”, cit., pp. 240-249, here p. 244.

⁵⁰ Klaus Mann, *Passion eines Menschen*, in “Das Neue Tage-Buch”, VI (1938), n. 15, pp. 357-358.

⁵¹ Cfr. Hans Sahl, *Das Exil im Exil*, cit., pp. 55-60.

⁵² Hans Sahl, *Jemand*, cit., p. 29.



“gesellschaftlichen Kontraste” of his age.⁵³ Projected onto a screen during its staging, Masereel’s etchings – to quote Klaus Mann’s acute observation – “haben hier keineswegs nur eine dekorative Funktion”, but “sie sind recht die Handlung selbst”,⁵⁴ and replace it. The poetic word then serves as an interpreter of individual situations offered by the silent images. The scenic effect established by the correspondences between picture and poetry could also suggest the cinematographic arts (in a review, in fact, *Jemand* was referred to as a “Holzschnittfilm”),⁵⁵ were it not for the music that imposes itself with such a solemn power. The work’s rerecording in Zurich in 1988⁵⁶ allows one to pinpoint the function of the musical sequences, which are almost always effective in relation to the text, especially when pertaining to the choral parts. Even though Sahl was unsatisfied with some of the scenes chosen by the composer (“Trotzdem hätte es noch ein größerer Erfolg sein können, wenn die Musik von Tibor [...] anders gewesen wäre”),⁵⁷ reprimanding him for having “verkompliziert meine einfachen, liedhaften Texte” with “atonale Scherzen”, he did not fail to recognize how powerful and effective the majestic tone of the final chorus was, and judged it “großartig”.⁵⁸

The oratorio follows the life of a working-class man, one of many, an *everyman*, shorn of a proper name precisely⁵⁹ because he is only a man amongst men whose destiny is not dissimilar from that of thousands of other working-class people throughout the world. The long literary tradition of *nemo*, from the beginning of the Baroque through his reappearance in Toller’s *Masse Mensch* and Hugo von Hofmannstahl’s *Jedermann*, is thus revitalized within the

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Klaus Mann, *Passion eines Menschen*, cit.

⁵⁵ Cfr. Hans Sahl, *Jemand*, cit., p. 100.

⁵⁶ In the new edition of the oratorio edited by Gregor Ackermann and Momme Brodersen there is also a CD with a recording of the oratorio which took place in Zurich, in the presence of the author, in 1988.

⁵⁷ Hans Sahl, *Jemand*, cit., p. 97.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ In the *exposé* of his works Sahl gave the protagonist the name of Karl, a name most likely chosen in homage to Marx (cfr. *ivi*, p. 91).



context of contemporary mass society – the *Sprecher*, in fact, introduces the story of the anonymous amongst men in the following way:

Dies ist die Passion eines Menschen [...] Fragt nicht nach seinem Namen. Er hat keinen. Fragt nicht nach dem Land, in dem er geboren wurde. Dieses Land hat keine Grenzen. Aber fragt nach den Grenzen zwischen Arm und Reich und nach den Bedingungen seiner Existenz. Er spricht zu euch, einer aus der großen Masse, die entschlossen ist, die Welt von der Unterdrückung des Menschen durch den Menschen zu befreien. Sein Beispiel steht für viele. Wir nennen ihn: *Jemand*.⁶⁰

The working-class man's path is effectively expressed by the text's triadic structure. The first section concerns the birth of a child and its infancy in a miserable "Mietskaserne" in an industrial city; a children's choir universalizes the protagonist's condition in the piece's only *intermezzi* of such voices:

Wir sind die Kinder, die man nicht kennt,
die Kinder vom Hinterhaus,
wir sind nicht gebügelt, wir sind nicht gekämmt,
wir tragen immer dasselbe Hemd,
das ziehen wir auch Sonntags nicht aus.⁶¹

While still a young boy, the protagonist soon suffers the injustice of industrial society directly upon his skin. First he is exploited by a job which consumes his young flesh, then he is condemned to multiple years in prison for stealing a piece of bread. The hymn that precedes the close of the section expresses disdain in the face of such social injustice and serves to both instruct the listeners as well as promote the piece's revolutionary message:

⁶⁰ *Ivi*, pp. 58-59.

⁶¹ *Ivi*, p. 61.



Das kommt, weil niemand sich bemüht,
den Schaden zu beheben,
wenn ihr den Herren den Profit,
den Mächtigen die Macht entzieht,
ist wieder Platz für jeden.
Dann gibt es keinen Hunger mehr,
kein Vorrecht, keine Klassen.
Die Erde gibt den Reichtum her,
und über Grenzen, übers Meer
verbünden sich die Massen.⁶²

The oratorio's second section begins with the young man's exit from prison. He is soon forced into an exhausting job on the asphalt of a metropolis that absorbs all his vital energy, and plunges him into a dull anonymity and sense of emptiness which is difficult to heal: "Und immer wieder diese Leere, / und dieses Suchen nach dem Grund".⁶³ His encounter with the Communist Manifesto takes on the appearance of a religious revelation. The "book of books" opens the exploited one's eyes, and finally indicates a direction for him to orient his existence, an existence which had been eviscerated by an inhuman society:

O Welt, o Wunder,
Buch der Bücher,
o Manifest der Unterdrückten –
es brach aus ihm wie mit Fanfaren,
er wurde klar, er wurde sicher [...].
Der Kampf der Klassen, die Geschichte
erschien ihm jetzt in anderm Lichte.
Erfüllt vom Pathos der Historie,
sah er die Dinge, wie sie waren:
sehr arm, sehr elend und ohne Glorie –

⁶² *Ivi*, p. 64.

⁶³ *Ivi*, p. 70.



doch über allem stand geschrieben
das Wort: Du sollst den Menschen lieben!⁶⁴

In a symmetrical fashion to the first part, a chorus concludes the section with the notes of *Das Lied des Menschen*, a song which, in an anthropocentric vision intent on demolishing the centrality of profit (“Der Mensch ist das Maß aller Dinge, / für ihn ist die Erde gemacht”),⁶⁵ calls for the struggle against capitalism’s subversion of human principles that has reduced humankind into the position of slavery:

Die Lehre, ihn glücklich zu machen,
ist vom Menschen zu Menschen gedacht,
drum preise den Menschen und singe
und führe ihn aus der Nacht.
Und zeige, was ihm gegeben
und was er vermag, wenn er will:
dass er sich zum Menschen erheben
und nie mehr im Staub kriechen will.⁶⁶

The revolutionary credo, connected to the Christian ethic of loving one’s neighbor, takes definitive shape in the third and last section of the oratorio. There our everyman, by now conscious of the class struggle, organizes a strike against the director of the factory in which he works (the latter traditionally depicted as the “man in a top hat”). On the basis of an *imitatio Christi*, as we shall see, the revolutionary is executed for pronouncing his belief in a more just society. His *Opfertod*, nevertheless, gives power to the final chorus, which in a majestic hymn looks toward a future free from capitalist (and, as we shall see ahead, Nazi) “barbarism”.

The superficial structure of the text indeed suits the needs of the propagandistic *Festspiel*. Derived from the Russian *Proletkult*, the po-

⁶⁴ *Ivi*, pp. 72-73.

⁶⁵ *Ivi*, p. 73.

⁶⁶ *Ivi*, p. 74.



litical *Festspiel* developed autonomously in 1920s Germany. Reconnecting itself to preexistent forms of mass theatricality (the *Passionsspiel*, *Mysterienspiel*, *Weibespiel*, etc.), the social democratic *Festspiel* sought a “Gemeinschaftsbildung”⁶⁷ and employed forms of *mise-en-scène* in order to involve all its participants in a collective rite celebrating the principles of orthodox Marxism, class struggle, proletarian revolution, and pacifism. All of the effects that formally characterize the genre – great choruses, music, lights, optical and acoustical effects – were effective in the inclusion of the mass. The presence of a *Sprechchor*, arisen as a “künstlerische Ausdrucksform des Proletariats”,⁶⁸ was intended moreover to substitute the subjectivity of the single voice with the polyphony of the collective “we” and thereby tie in the socialist message of *Verbrüderung*. Sahl’s text, however, shares only a few of these aspects of the socialistically inspired *Festspiel*. The sophisticated interference of figurative art, word, and music gives it the dimension of *Gesamtkunstwerke*, and thus makes it impossible to reduce to the aesthetic flatness of the traditional *Festspiel*. Sahl, however, was impatient with his commissioners, and claimed the autonomy of a much more articulate inspiration, writing in 1937 to Lotte Goslar:

Du kannst Dir vorstellen mit welcher arroganter Verständnislosigkeit sich die leitenden Parteibonzen mit mir und meiner Arbeit auseinandersetzen. [...] und es ist ihnen nicht klar zu machen, dass ich ja kein Schweizer Festspiel geschrieben habe, sondern eine Passion, die ein europäisches Schicksal behandelt.⁶⁹

In this way *Jemand* is permeated by miscellaneous influences which range from the traditional *Festspiel* to Piscator’s *Revue-Form*, from Brecht’s *Lehrstücke* to political cabaret. One must also add the model of sacred *Passions*, a model which conditions not only the inspiration of the musical notation, but the textual *ductus* as well. The sacred ora-

⁶⁷ Pia Janke, *Politische Massenfestspiele in Österreich zwischen 1918 und 1938* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2010), p. 31.

⁶⁸ *Ivi*, p. 75.

⁶⁹ Hans Sahl, *Jemand*, cit., p. 96.



torio, with its specific references to Bach's *Matthäuspassion*, deconstructs the monochrome nature of the *Sprecher* of the traditional *Festspiel*: in *Jemand a Sprecher* acts as a narrator (as does the evangelist in Bach's *Passion*), but it alternates with the voices of the chorus and solos of the various arias. With that, the model of the *Passion* imbues the work, conferring upon it not only a sacred shine, but a revolutionary solemnity liberated from party dogmatism (even if some remains in the didactic sections). Unsurprisingly perhaps the work was immediately called a "Gottesdienst des Proletariats"⁷⁰ in various reviews. The subdivision of the choral voices into masculine and feminine is handled beautifully and follows a logic that is in line with the demands of the text. It is enough to consider the "Großer Chor vom Jemand" sequence, which appears in the text as a sort of refrain, and in the musical notation as an authentic leitmotif that varies in accordance with the different choral sequences. The majestic and authoritative structure of the Großer Chor's music tends to give prominence to the text, which is developed through anaphora and focused on the theme of the pain of human destiny, a pain to which the redemption of the red revolution shall respond:

Geboren mit Schmerzen,
geboren im Dunkel,
geboren im Herzen der großen Städte,
geboren, die Fahne der Armut zu tragen,
und einmal, in nicht mehr so fernen Tagen,
in einem nicht mehr so fernen Oktober,
die Fahnen auf allen Dächern zu hissen,
und nicht mehr zu fragen und nicht mehr zu wissen,
was Armut ist.⁷¹

Sahl's intention of adding an aura of sacred solemnity to the revolutionary pathos of his oratorio remains clear, and it is thus freed from the rather abused forms of the propagandistic *Festspiel* – Sahl

⁷⁰ Cfr. *ivi*, p. 118.

⁷¹ *Ivi*, p. 60.



himself explains that he wrote the text “nicht mit roten Fahnen, sondern in Form einer Bachischen Passion”.⁷² The model of Bach’s *Passion* is anything but secondary within the overall structure of a work that is at times presented as an *Oratorium*, at times a *weltliche Kantate*, and at times more generically as a *Chorwerk*. The oscillation between *cantata profana* and oratorio seems to be limited to terminology and not more marked musical differences; however, due to the presence of a consistent number of choral elements (which in a *cantata* are reduced to the essential) as well as the temporal extension of its execution,⁷³ *Jemand* mirrors the oratorical canon more. The sacred passion permeates the text of the “cantata profana” through the *basso continuo* of sacrifice and redemption. The blood of Christ offered for humanity’s redemption from sin recalls the blood offered of the revolutionary for the proletariat’s redemption from capitalism. This association, furthermore, claims numerous precedents: born of the impressions of the failed revolution and the assassination of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, the revolutionary’s reason for the *Passionsgeschichte* was already present in Erich Mühsam’s *Juda*, Ernst Toller’s *Masse Mensch*, and Friedrich Wolf’s *Der arme Konrad*.⁷⁴ The constant interference of Biblical language mirrors the process of the Christian Passion’s absorption into the *weltliche Passion* of the revolutionary. In Mase-reel’s penultimate woodcut one sees a man from behind standing before an imposing table; judges are seated around it and behind them hangs an enormous crucifix emanating a light which draws attention to the two principal elements: the accused and the redeemer. The image allows Sahl to set up the major scene of the final

⁷² *Ivi*, p. 100.

⁷³ As Pia Janke tellingly notes (*op. cit.*, p. 82), subtitles like *Weibespiel*, *ein proletarisches Passionspiel*, *Chorwerk*, *Kantate*, *Oratorium*, *Requiem* were all equivalent terms for the propagandistic *Festspiel*: “Auffällig bei diesen Untertiteln ist der Rückbezug auf traditionellen Gattungen religiöser und weltlicher Dichtung. Man intendierte mit diesen Begriffen offensichtlich eine Anbindung an die Tradition”.

⁷⁴ Cfr. Thomas Koebner, *Der Passionsweg der Revolutionäre. Christliche Motive im politischen Drama der Zwanziger Jahre*, in *Preis der Vernunft. Literatur und Kunst zwischen Aufklärung, Widerstand und Anpassung*, edited by Klaus Siebenhaar (Berlin: Medusa, 1982), pp. 39-50.



judgment as an *imitatio Christi* of the persecuted revolutionary destined to die an *Opfertod* for having tried to redeem humanity from “barbarism”. The chorus responds to the urgent *recitativo* of the judge’s words (“Wessen ist dieser Mensch angeklagt?”) by singing (“Er hat gesagt, dass die armen Leute / nicht mehr arm / und die reichen / nicht mehr reich sein dürfen!”) while the accused, who has long been silent, simply utters a quick line recalling the mission of Christ: “Ich bin geboren und in die Welt gekommen, dass ich die Wahrheit sagen soll”.⁷⁵ The “truth” he refers to is that of people’s equality and their need to be redeemed from social injustice: “Wenn die Sonne scheint – das ist Wahrheit, / wenn den Menschen die Sonne nicht freut, weil er leiden muss – das ist Wahrheit, / und Wahrheit ist, wenn er schreit”.⁷⁶

The revolutionary’s death sentence does not discourage the workers’ chorus, which in the grand finale restores itself in a profession of faith in Europe’s imminent redemption from “barbarism”:

Es geht durch alle fünf Kontinente,
 es geht um die Erde ein einziger Schrei,
 es strömt aus allen Ländern der Erde,
 es strömt eine Welt von Empörten herbei:
 Rettet den Menschen, rettet den Menschen,
 rettet die Welt von der Barbarei! [...]
 Es kommt eine letzte, große Entscheidung,
 es kommt das Ende der großen Nacht,
 dann richten sich auf, die man beleidigt,
 dann wird in Europa Geschichte gemacht:
 Rettet den Menschen, rettet den Menschen,
 rettet die Welt von der Barbarei.⁷⁷

The identification of “barbarism” with capitalism is ambiguous. In *Jemand* Sahl suggests the equivalence between capitalism and Na-

⁷⁵ Hans Sahl, *Jemand*, cit., pp. 80-81.

⁷⁶ *Ivi*, p. 84.

⁷⁷ *Ivi*, p. 89.



zism,⁷⁸ a comparison Klaus Mann did not miss a beat in criticizing for its excess of superficiality: “Durch dieses Nebeneinander und Ineinander zweier Tendenzen – einer sentimentalisch-rebellisch-antikapitalistischen, die Sahl bei Masereel vorfand, und einer strikt antifaschistischen – entsteht eine ideologische Konfusion”.⁷⁹ Born in the context of exile, however, *Jemand* also acts as a mouthpiece for the urgent needs related to the *hic et nunc* of the exile forced to flee Germany as a political opponent and suspected communist. The utopia envisioned by the oratorio calls upon the proletariat of all of Europe to liberate itself from capitalism and its ally: Nazi barbarism:

Es gibt einige musikalisch überwältigende Passagen in diesem von ihm [Kasicz] vertonten Chorwerk, vor allem jenen grandiosen Schlusschor “Rettet den Menschen, rettet den Menschen, rettet die Welt von der Barbarei”, in dem ein bereits von Hitler zum Schweigen gebrachtes Europa zum Widerstand gegen ihn aufgerufen wird.⁸⁰

Vincent: painting and cinematographic technique in the “drama of images”

The project centered on the figure of Vincent van Gogh – of which remains a trace in a “Szenenfolge” – takes form during the author’s Parisian years of exile. Based on his autobiographical declarations one easily concludes that Sahl had thought of the project before his arrival in Paris, weaving together with the Dutch painter – who he had admired since childhood – an intimate and uninterrupted “Drama der Bilder”. His interest in figurative art and its re-

⁷⁸ The equivalence is explicit, aside from the final chorus, in the *Kantate der Volksgemeinschaft* as well: “Vernichtet ist der innre Feind, / wir haben ihn aufs Haupt geschlagen, / es wird kein anderer, wie es scheint, / in Zukunft solche Untat wagen. / Wer uns an Hab und Gut bedroht, / der soll es mit dem Leben zahlen, / und weil die Menschheit so verroht, / muss man sie strafen allemalen... / Drum hebt die Hände und ruft: Heil! / Der Führer wird schon Ordnung stiften, / mit Ehrendolch und Henkerbeil” (*ivi*, p. 80).

⁷⁹ *Ivi*, p. 124.

⁸⁰ Hans Sahl, *Das Exil im Exil*, cit., p. 57.



presentatives constitute an inescapable symbol of the author's personality. A student of art history in Munich, Leipzig, and Breslau, Sahl received the title of Doctor in Art History in 1925 with a dissertation on 15th century German painting⁸¹ under the supervision of Professor August Grisebach, to whom Sahl would dedicate a splendid portrait in his memoirs.⁸² Grisebach's methodology influenced Sahl greatly, and the influence of his teaching that "jeder Subjektivismus war ihm verhasst, jedes vorschnelle Wort, das der Kunst ihr Geheimnis nehmen könnte"⁸³ is clear in Sahl's critical contributions on contemporary art, cinema, theatre, and literature. That the historical-critical method would also be Sahl's favorite is demonstrated by the various articles on contemporary art he wrote for German language dailies as a cultural correspondent from New York during the 1950s and '60s, years in which he was involved in the lively discussion surrounding action painting, displaying skepticism as regards the expressive extremes of the new American art.⁸⁴ His decade-long friendship with the painter, caricaturist, and founder of Berlin Dada George Grosz – as their great amount of letters demonstrates⁸⁵ – also reveals Sahl's interest in the art of his time. As far as Grosz is concerned – to whom he dedicated numerous essays and entrusted the editing of an edition of some of his drafts⁸⁶ – Sahl above all admired the well-balanced convergence in his art between two tendencies that were difficult to reconcile: aesthetic tendency, that

⁸¹ The title of his doctoral dissertation was: *Der Breslauer Barbara-Altar. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der deutschen Malerei im 15. Jahrhundert*. Cfr. *Sahl-Bibliographie*, cit., p. 23.

⁸² "Er war ein Deutscher, und zwar einer der besten, die dieses Land hervorgebracht hat, einer aus dem Geschlecht der Schlegel und Tieck und Wackenroder" (Hans Sahl, *Memoiren eines Moralisten*, cit., p. 73).

⁸³ *Ivi*, p. 74.

⁸⁴ On Sahl's involvement in the debate related to Abstract Expressionism cfr. Matthias Wolbold, *Zwischen Ablehnung, Anpassung und Zerrissenheit. Deutsche Exilautoren in den USA* (Hamburg: Kovač, 1999), p. 116ff. See also Andrea Reiter, *Die Exterritorialität des Denkens*, cit., p. 205ff.

⁸⁵ Cfr. George Grosz-Hans Sahl, *So long mit Händedruck. Briefe und Dokumente*, edited by Karl Riha (Hamburg: Luchterhand, 1993).

⁸⁶ Cfr. George Grosz, *Heimatliche Gestaltungen. Zeichnungen*, edited by Hans Sahl (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1966).



“nichts als Künstler zu sein”,⁸⁷ and political engagement which, instead, imposes upon the artist that “einzugreifen in den Tageskampf, Stellung zu nehmen”.⁸⁸ With his caricatures Grosz contributed to “hat das Gesicht einer Epoche gezeichnet”,⁸⁹ making “ein politisch[es] Pamphlet”⁹⁰ of every one of his drawings. The two tendencies synthesize the Spaltung of modern art, split as it is into a “dualism”, in a “ein Konflikt zwischen Abstinenz und Hingabe an den Tag”, “zwischen einer ästhetischen und einer moralisch-pädagogischen Haltung”.⁹¹ Sahl also traces in van Gogh’s artistic experience the double vocation of an art that reaches the maximum of self-discipline, lyricism, and subjectivism yet which, at the same time, is pervaded by an intimate social breath. Van Gogh seduces Sahl, in other words, not only by means of his majestic coloristic revolution and the human intensity of his biographical path, but by means of the moral and social commitment reflected in his works.

When Sahl arrived in the French capital at the end of 1933, he came carrying a great deal of knowledge connected to van Gogh’s artistic and existential path. Sahl confessed to having excitedly read the letters between Vincent and his brother Theo, going so far as to state that he knew “jede Zeile von ihm und jede Zeile seines Bruders Theo an ihm”.⁹² During Sahl’s youth, Vincent and Theo van Gogh’s letters represented an absolute innovation in publishing: the first German language edition appeared in 1914 (an edited and expanded second edition in 1928).⁹³ One could also suppose that, beyond the publication of Van Gogh’s letters, Sahl

⁸⁷ Hans Sahl, *Die Stockmensen*, in *Georg Grosz-Hans Sahl*, cit., p. 25.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Hans Sahl, *George Grosz oder die Vertreibung aus dem Paradies*, in *Georg Grosz-Hans Sahl*, cit., p. 9.

⁹⁰ *Ivi*, p. 16.

⁹¹ Hans Sahl, *Die Stockmensen*, cit., p. 25.

⁹² Hans Sahl, *Das Exil im Exil*, cit., p. 70.

⁹³ The epistolary correspondence between Vincent and Theo van Gogh was published in Holland in 1914 and edited by Johanna van Gogh-Bonger, the painter’s sister-in-law, who also supplied the introduction (*Brieven aan zijn broeder*, Amsterdam). The two volume German translation appeared in the same year and was edited by Leon Klein-Diebold and Carl Einstein, *Briefe an seinen Bruder* (Berlin: Paul Cassirer, 1914).



gained access to the painter's biography by means of a precise source: the work of the art critic and historian Julius Meier-Graefe, whose work at that time was considered among the most exclusive and original. Edited in Munich in 1910 and thereafter expanded,⁹⁴ I believe Meier-Graefe's edition of van Gogh's biography – punctually reviewed by Sahl in 1928⁹⁵ – is Sahl's primary source of material and inspiration. If on the one hand Meier-Graefe's work was among the first to illuminate the painter's life, on the other it contributed to the creation of the "myth" surrounding him and profoundly marked the reception of his art. Packed with "die heldenhafte Spannkraft, die allein – mehr, als alle angeborne Fertigkeit – das Genie verbürgt",⁹⁶ van Gogh emerges from Meier-Graefe's work as a figure walking a fine line between the demonic nature of a calling ever closer to the limits of mystical revelation and the laborious research of expressive means equal to that same revelation. Various elements of Meier-Graefe's treatment recur in Sahl's text, and they share the most incisive point: the accentuation of the mystical-lyrical character of van Gogh's genius, who is depicted as an exceptional person crushed under the weight of his fullness and condemned by his own talent to "Martyrium".⁹⁷

Indeed, in the first scenes of his text Sahl insists on the mystic-messianic inspiration of the young van Gogh's personality who, defined by an *imitatio Christi*, is filled with a fierce love for his neighbor. In the following scene, talking with his brother Theo and immersed in the twilight of his native landscape, the young van Gogh professes his faith in an art which must guarantee the vision of the fusion of the creation and the place humankind occupies within it:

The second and enlarged German edition of 1928, in three volumes, edited by the same translators, also has different pictures.

⁹⁴ The first edition of the biography of Vincent van Gogh by Julius Meier-Graefe was published in Munich by Piper in 1910. The biography was subsequently enlarged in 1918 with the addition of forty new images and facsimiles of the painter's letters.

⁹⁵ Hans Sahl, *Julius Meier-Graefe: Vincent van Gogh, der Zeichner* (Berlin: Otto Wacker Verlag, 1928), in "Das Neue Tage-Buch", IX (1928), n. 45, pp. 1911-1912.

⁹⁶ Julius Meier-Graefe, *Vincent van Gogh* (Munich: Piper, 1918), p. 8.

⁹⁷ *Ivi*, p. 46.



Wir wollen das Leben ernst nehmen, Theo. In jedem Augenblick das Ganze sehen. Den großen Zusammenhang wiederentdecken, in den wir gestellt sind. Das Drama eines Baumes. Das Drama der Farben, Bilder, Konturen. Das Drama einer Welt in Aufruhr. [...] Und dazwischen immer wieder der Mensch – arm, häßlich, und erhaben zugleich.⁹⁸

However, it is above all the second scene which offers a portrait of the young van Gogh uniquely inspired by faith and love for humanity afflicted by suffering and social injustice. The scene changes to Borinage, one of the poorest coal mining regions of Belgium, where van Gogh spent 1879 as a preacher. His ascetic, visionary, and radical inclination, however, was soon no longer acceptable to the ecclesiastical authorities, and he was released from his duties. The following scene sees van Gogh leaving his people, those people for whom he expressed a spirit of radical abnegation bordering on paroxysm – in a frame of the scene we see him divest himself of absolutely everything in order to give it to a woman who has fallen on hard times due to the loss of one of her relatives in the mines. The so-called mad saint's *gestus* and subsequent nude procession through the snow-covered moorland is of a particular dramatic expressivity:

Vincent beugt sich über die Frau. Er zieht seinen Priesterrock aus und legt ihn ihr über die Schultern. Dann nimmt er seine Uhr, seine Geldtasche, drückt ihr beides in die herabhängende Hand und geht schnell fort. Er geht, nur mit Hemd und Hose bekleidet, durch den Schnee, die Bibel in der Hand.⁹⁹

The *imitatio Christi* of the scene is linked to the subsequent one of a profession of faith that soon crosses over into humanitarian socialism: talking with the cold representative of the church authorities

⁹⁸ Here and following we shall quote the printed version of the text from 1956: Hans Sahl, *Vincent. Eine Szenenfolge aus dem Leben des Malers Van Gogh*, in “Das Schönste. Die Monatsschrift für alle Freunde der schönen Künste” (1956), n. 7, pp. 3-10 and 57-58 and (1956), n. 8, pp. 30-38, here p. 3.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*



who will relieve the mad saint of his duty, van Gogh responds: “Ich habe mein Brot mit den Armen geteilt – war das nicht christlich?”¹⁰⁰

Only at this point, absolved of his responsibilities, does he decide to focus his messianic aspirations in art: “Maler und Prediger – Mönchsein und Künstlersein – ist das nicht ein und dasselbe?”¹⁰¹ By the third scene he has arrived in Paris, where he has gone to discover his own artistic talent as well as the faith of his friend Gauguin. Reinvigorated by the city and his friend’s temptation to “discover the south” by taking a trip to Provence (“Gehen Sie in den Süden. Was Ihnen fehlt, sind die Farben. Malen Sie die Sonne – entdecken Sie das Licht – und vergessen Sie Holland”),¹⁰² van Gogh transfers the utopia of humanity’s redemption, that same humanity he had tried to help with the Biblical word, to the world of art. Consequently, he has the idea of founding a “Malerkolonie”, an idea which suggests the dream of a new social community founded on equality:

Wir müssen eine Malerkolonie gründen – irgendwo im Süden – die Misere, die jeder mit sich allein herumträgt, muß ein Ende haben – gründen wir eine Gemeinschaft – eine Union freier Künstler – malen wir das Porträt des Menschen von heute – das Porträt des Bauern, des Arbeiters – malen wir, was hinter diesen Stirnen geschrieben steht – Kampf und Mühe, und das ewige Suchen nach etwas anderem – das müssen wir malen – die ganze Wahrheit über den Menschen – das erregende Abenteuer der Wahrheit...¹⁰³

The artist’s progressive approach to the “truth” proceeds at the same pace as his discovery of the most vivid chromatic intensities within his work. Sahl faithfully follows Meier-Graefe’s scheme concerning the three phases of van Gogh’s painting which shows that, after having passed through an initial phase of chromatic flatness influenced by his native landscape and a gradual awareness of color during his Parisian period, his full expressive potential was reached only

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ivi*, p. 4.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*



in Provence in the delightful landscape of Arles. No less than these premises, one must consider the author's own biographical path at the time he began his text on van Gogh.

Paris, as we said before, was not only the physical place that inspired Sahl to begin his work on van Gogh but also the ideal point of contact with the primary figure of his text. The process of identification between Sahl and the Dutch painter plays a role which is anything but incidental in the incipient phases of the text's formulation, in as much as van Gogh seems to be a silent travel partner who accompanies the disoriented exile through the streets of Paris, spurring him on to an enthralling conversation of images superimposed one upon the other that become mixed up in the places of his personal and artistic history. There are numerous points that connect Sahl to van Gogh the moment he arrives in Paris: poverty, isolation, and the struggle to express himself. In the diaries held at Marbach, four of which concern his years in Paris, Sahl unflinchingly recounts his frustration due to his precarious financial state and the isolation he felt as a foreigner in exile. Poverty, nostalgia for his homeland, and hunger unequivocally mark the pages of those first years in exile. On one of them, most likely dating between 1934-1935, Sahl even glues a small piece of paper which eloquently describes his situation better than anything else: a receipt for a free daily meal at the cafeteria for the poor of Paris "Cercle François Villon". And the author does not hesitate to give a description of the cafeteria on the same page, oscillating between a sense of gratitude and uncontainable frustration due to the loss of dignity connected to receiving charity.¹⁰⁴

The author mentions that van Gogh also faced such a precarious financial and existential situation when he arrived in Paris in 1888.

¹⁰⁴ In the diary one reads: "Cercle François-Villon. Es ist ein großer Raum mit etwa 20 Tischen, in denen je 10 Personen sitzen können. Wenn man herein kommt, gibt man seine Gratismarke ab und bekommt dafür einen Zettel mit einer Nummer. Man geht einen Stock höher, in einen Warteraum, der zwar etwa primitiv ist – wie der Wartesaal in einem Bahnhof – in denen es aber Tische gibt und Zeitschriften und ein Klavier [...]. Und am Ende des riesengroßen Saales gibt es ein Buffet [...]. Das Essen ist anständig: Suppe, Fleisch, Kartoffeln [...]. Es ist gut, im Circle François Villon zu essen. Es zerstört die letzten Illusionen, die man sich noch über seine Lage gemacht hat" (DLA-Marbach, A:Sahl/Autobiographisches/Tagebücher/TB II).



Sahl seems to begin an intimate conversation with the “foreigner” van Gogh, moving through Paris on the search for those models that inspired the painter’s works and eventually travelling to Auvers sur Oise, the tiny village where van Gogh spent the last months of his life in the grips of an intense creative fever. Moreover, Paris is the city in which the painter reached the quest for his own talent and, like him, Sahl arrives there convinced of possessing a literary calling even if he had yet to display it in finished works. At this point one understands the process of identification that drove Sahl to working on the biography and works of van Gogh:

Es gab eine Zeit in Paris, da war ich Van Gogh, da lebte ich, hungerte ich, verzweifelte ich wie Van Gogh. Ich war Van Gogh. Ich war arm wie Van Gogh, besessen wie er. Ich suchte wie der Maler nach den Modellen seiner Bilder, und fand sie, identifizierte sie alle [...]. Er war ein Fremder in Frankreich. Er war der einsamste Mensch, der je in dieser Stadt gelebt hat.¹⁰⁵

The poem *Hier ruht van Gogh* dates to the time of Sahl’s Parisian exile as well and is the poem he gave prominence to by placing it among the first in his cycle *Die hellen Nächte*, the anthology published in New York in 1942.¹⁰⁶ In all likelihood the poem grew out of his experience travelling to Auvers sur Oise, to which the first two stanzas refer. In the poem the poet describes not only the important stations of his trip, but the moving sobriety of the painter’s tomb, buried next to his brother in the common embrace of ivy which symbolizes the profound bond that existed between the two: “Zwei Gräber, dicht an jener Mauer, / Vincent und Theo, Efeu wächst darüber, / Kein Kreuz, kein Monument der Trauer”.¹⁰⁷ The following three stanzas condense the essence of a life destined to become legendary (“Ein Malerleben wurde zur Legende”) thanks to the intensity the artist dedicated to his search for a supreme truth which in his works was transformed into a

¹⁰⁵ Hans Sahl, *Das Exil im Exil*, cit., p. 70.

¹⁰⁶ Cfr. Hans Sahl, *Die hellen Nächte. Gedichte aus Frankreich* (New York: Barthold Fles, 1942).

¹⁰⁷ Hans Sahl, *Hier ruht van Gogh*, in *Die hellen Nächte*, cit., p. 10.



crude and, at the same time, visionary realism. In the third stanza the “myth” of van Gogh in its Meier-Graefer-esque mode returns, coming in the wake of a sacralization of the artist “martyred” by his inspiration and possessed by a thirst for truth which exhausted all of his vital energy; one notes the use of the polyptoton that insists upon the theme of “truth”: “Er wollte wahr sein, und er starb daran, / Die Wahrheit blieb, es starben nur die Hände”. In the fourth stanza Sahl summarizes van Gogh’s artistic experience under the sign of Expressionism, to which the evocation of the *Urschrei*, a vivid “metafora della violenza che l’Io esercita sulle cose [...] constringendole a diventare echi infinitamente ripercossi di un tormento incontenibile”¹⁰⁸ clearly refers: “Er schrie in Farben, die noch keiner kannte, / Er malte schreiend Erde, Mensch und Baum / Und malte, malte, bis sein Geist verbrannte”. How render the power of a color arisen from the primordial cry, from the stigma of artistic martyrdom and a vocation to the corrosive truth all the way up to the annihilation of the individual? If these are the elements of van Gogh’s artistic and human experience that attracted Sahl from the very beginning, the principal difficulty was choosing the most appropriate form in which to depict him. The author’s statements not only demonstrate the uncertainty of intent but, above all, the results achieved.

Sahl worked on his van Gogh project throughout the seven years he spent in France and up through his arrival in the United States. There (as numerous pieces in the archives demonstrate) for quite some time he pinned a lot of hopes on it being picked up by the cinematographic industry, however to no avail.¹⁰⁹ He still had hopes for

¹⁰⁸ Ferruccio Masini, *L’espressionismo: una rivoluzione “per l’elementare”*, in *Gli schiavi di Efesto. L’avventura degli scrittori tedeschi del Novecento* (Pordenone: Ed. Studio Tesi, 1990), p. 31. (“Metaphor of the violence which the ego exerts upon things [...] forcing them to become the infinite echoes of an inexorable torment”).

¹⁰⁹ Among the various directors to whom Sahl turned for help with his text on van Gogh were Georg Wilhelm Papst, Ludwig Berger and Paul Kohner – the latter, already working in Hollywood, had to refuse Sahl’s script because he was already working on an adaptation of Irving Stone’s *Lust for Life* (1934), which also focused on the figure of van Gogh. For the salient passages from Sahl and Paul Kohner’s correspondence in relation to the cinematographic project on van Gogh cfr. Ruth Oelze, *Über Hans Sahl. “Kritik ist schöpferische Kunst”*, cit., pp. 41-42.



such a success in 1939 when he decided to publish a brief extract in “Das Neue Tage-Buch”.¹¹⁰ On that occasion the text was given the unambiguous title *Aus einem Van-Gogh-Film*. As opposed to the numerous cinematographic projects that can be found in the archival material, the text on van Gogh offers unambiguous perspectives for examination, encouraging one to frame the surviving scenes not only within the genre of cinematographic scripts, but – and this is my hypothesis – within an area which tends at times to exploit the cinematographic medium and, at times, the theatrical. On a page of his memoirs Sahl offers a detailed description of the beginning of his *Szenario* on van Gogh, writing:

Ich wollte ein Stück über ihn schreiben [...] Das war im Jahre 1937. Damals wurden die ersten Farbfilme hergestellt. Ich wollte zeigen, wie sich die Farbe bei Van Gogh entwickelte. Der erste Teil, der in seiner holländischen Heimat spielt, war in Schwarz-Weiß gehalten, das Grau-in-Grau der Kartoffeleßer und anderer Bilder aus jener Zeit, die nordische Landschaft, niedriger Himmel. Dann Van Gogh in Paris. Eine Nacht am Montmartre, mit Toulouse-Lautrec, Renoir; die Mistinguette singt. Am Morgen kommt Van Gogh nach Hause, durch die Fenster sieht er plötzlich das Licht, die Farben von Paris. In diesem Augenblick wird der Film zum Farbfilm. In einem Vorwort schrieb ich: Dies ist ein Drama der Bilder.¹¹¹

The confusion regarding his aims is more than clear. The text was first conceived of as a *Stück* (that is, in terms of theatrical scenes), but the multiplicity of the elements in the background (landscape, scenes of continuous movement, etc.) led the author to abandon the initial project. Thus, when it came to writing his text, he had one medium only in mind, the cinematographic one, and therefore called his text a “Szenario” for a film on van Gogh. If on the one hand the author tends to develop his scenes with a theatre-like eye, on the

¹¹⁰ Hans Sahl, *Aus einem Van-Gogh-Film*, in “Das Neue Tage-Buch”, VII (1939), n. 1, pp. 18-20.

¹¹¹ Hans Sahl, *Das Exil im Exil*, cit., p. 70.



other he succumbs to the allure of the possibilities guaranteed by the new cinematographic technology, above all, that of working in color. The *Farbfilm*, in fact, could effectively render that essential element of the text that otherwise would be impossible to represent in the scene: the chromatic evolution in the painting of van Gogh which was consistent with his artistic growth.

Nevertheless, the project's translation into film did not seem to satisfy the author completely. It is likely that the piece – on which he had so assiduously and expertly worked – was simply too close to Sahl's heart for him not to feel that its exclusive realization in the cinematographic field would somehow be reductive. Furthermore, one must realize that in terms of literary worth, Sahl did not have a particularly high regard for his texts for the cinema. As he writes in his diary:

Ein Film-Manuskript ist kein Werk der Literatur [...] die Sprache ist nicht Ziel des literarischen Drehbuchs sondern Durchgangsstation. Die besten Drehbücher sind oft von Menschen geschrieben worden, die keinen richtigen Satz zu Papier bringen konnten.¹¹²

And it is the same diary that demonstrates the plan to adapt the *Szenario* in dramatic form. The related note is eloquent as it reveals the author's dissatisfaction with the sole realization of his text, aware perhaps that some of the positive scenic choices could easily have been adapted for the theatre. The note most probably dates to the second half of 1941 when Sahl was already in New York. On the page in question, the author formulates a list of projects, many of which would not be followed up. Among these, three are concerned with van Gogh: "Entwürfe: 1) Gedichtband; 2) Lyrische Anthologie [...] 3) Van Gogh = Drama; 4) Van Gogh = Hörspiel; 5) Artikel über Auvers/S. Oise (Van Gogh); 6) Buch über Toulouse Lautrec".¹¹³ A dramatic version of the text (in the form of a *Hörspiel*), however, was never completed. Nevertheless, from that which remains the two-

¹¹² DLA-Marbach, A:Sahl/Autobiographisches/Tagebücher/ TB V.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*



fold tension which inspired Sahl in the moment of drafting his scenes emerges. As opposed to the other surviving Filmexposés, the *Szenario* for a film on van Gogh stands out on account of both its literary nature (which also hindered attempts at its cinematographic realization, causing one director to comment that the text was too well written to be a script)¹¹⁴ as well as its clear subdivision into scenes (which the other Filmexposés preserved in the archives do not have) and powerful moments of theatre-like dialogue.

The series of seventeen scenes published in 1956 in the Munich magazine “Das Schönste” makes one think that, with respect to the initial project, Sahl had radically changed the implications of his text. If the scenes published in “Das Neue Tage-Buch” in 1939 were preceded by the title *Aus einem Van-Gogh Film*, the title of the later text made no reference whatsoever to cinema: *Vincent. Eine Szenenfolge aus dem Leben des Malers Van Gogh*. The technique employed in the *Szenenfolge* is clearly the one the author most preferred in the construction of his dramatic pieces. From the oratorio *Jemand* – subdivided into a sequence of scenes marked by the projection of Masereel’s woodcuts onto a screen – to the dramas *Hausmusik* and *Rubinstein* – assembled on the sequence of scenes – Sahl breaks the action of his dramatic texts down into individual tableau. The construction of the *Szenenfolge* recalls a well-established tradition which, beginning with the *Passionsspiele* and revolutionized by the model of the Strindbergian *Stationendrama*, had been revitalized by the Expressionist Theatre (one thinks of Georg Kaiser’s *Von Morgens bis Mitternachts* or Else Lasker-Schüler’s *Die Wupper*). And the *Szenenfolge* itself is recalled, for example, by Peter Szondi in his *Theorie des modernen Dramas* to give an example of the disruption of the classical unity of action within modern drama (“Die Einheit der Handlung [wird] durch die Einheit des Ich ersetzt [...] das Handlungskontinuum in eine Szenenfolge aufgelöst”).¹¹⁵ Apart from the continuity it shares with the theatrical tradition of the early 20th century (a tradition that stabilizes itself,

¹¹⁴ It was the director Paul Kohner who judged the text too “well-written” in a letter to Sahl. Cfr. Ruth Oelze, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

¹¹⁵ Peter Szondi, *Theorie des modernen Dramas 1880-1950*, in *Schriften*, edited by Wolfgang Ietkau (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1978), vol. I, p. 47.



moreover, in the second half of the 20th century as well with Heiner Müller, Botho Strauß, Marlene Streeruwitz, etc.), one could find that the assembly technique of the scenes in sequence, even if disrupting the linearity of classical drama, lends itself to those intermedial mixtures of cinema, figurative art, and theatre to which Hans Sahl dramatic works also tend. The theatrical technique of the *Szenenfolge* comes close to the sequential editing of the cinematographic art: to the static quality of photography, the cinema substitutes the dynamism of the sequence of individual frames, in that way every scene becomes a conceptual and visual frame complete in itself, not necessarily invested with a casual arrangement with respect to the optical aphorism that precedes or succeeds it.

The “acoustic” author: the production of the Hörspiele

On a page of his memoirs Sahl describes himself as an “optischer” author who became an “akustischer”¹¹⁶ one. The author’s sensitivity to the oral text became exclusive at an advanced age when eye problems forced him to develop a new method of textual elaboration: dictation. In this regard his reflections on the difference between the modern writer, used to a silent activity of *labor limae* directed toward the rather silent consumption of the text through its being read, and the writer of antiquity for whom the dimension of the story instead was tied to the sound of his own voice and conditioned by the times of orality, are very eloquent. Indeed, the oral story possesses “seine eigene Diktion”, “es duldet keine Pausen”, “es zielt auf das Ganze, nicht mehr auf ein Detail”, there are precise strategies “den Zuhörer nicht zu verlieren”; the modern writer, on the other hand, is prey to the “Introspektion der Kunst”, “rede[t] mit sich selbst und nicht mehr mit dem Zuhörer oder dem Leser”, he anxiously seeks the *mot juste*, so that his activities are resolved in a sort of “Selbstbefriedigung mit der Sprache”.¹¹⁷ If the acoustic dimension forces the author to confront a narrative condition limited

¹¹⁶ Hans Sahl, *Memoiren eines Moralisten* (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1985), p. 64.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*



by the *tempus* of oral transmission, it could be argued that Sahl's sensitivity to a form of oral narration was alive within him well before the deterioration of his eyes, a fact to which various dramatic pieces conceived for radio – which fascinated Sahl no less than the cinema – attest.

It is well known that beginning in the 1920s the radio aroused not just a small degree of interest on the part of German authors, engaged as they were in various theoretical reflections on the author's purpose within mass culture (consider, for example, the thoughts of Brecht and Benjamin).¹¹⁸ Acoustic narration quickly revealed itself advantageous to a literary genre that had no precedents and configured itself as “die einzige genuine Kunstgattung des Mediums Radio”:¹¹⁹ the *Hörspiel*. Born as a drama conceived exclusively for the acoustic medium,¹²⁰ the *Hörspiel* subverts traditional theatrical practice founded on the presupposition of the presence of actors and spectators for the duration of the performance. Generally quite short and for the most part pared down to only one act, the *Hörspiele* employ precise compositional strategies to guarantee the listener's attention (brief dialogues, musical interludes, pauses reduced to the essential, changes of the actors' voices, etc.).

Open to the new possibilities offered by the radiophonic medium – not least that of reaching a considerable number of listeners simultaneously – in 1942 Sahl conceived the first of his *Hörspiel* entitled *Urlaub vom Tod*, which was also destined to remain the only one ever broadcast. Written in New York as a piece of anti-Nazi propa-

¹¹⁸ In his essay *Der Rundfunk als Kommunikationsapparat* Brecht thematizes a *Rundfunktheorie* in an analogous way to Benjamin's thoughts on the matter in *Theater und Rundfunk* and *Situation im Rundfunk*. Beyond any specific theoretical differences, Schiller-Lerg observes: “Hier trafen sich der Praktiker Brecht als Theoretiker und der Theoretiker Benjamin als Praktiker in einem neuen Medienbewusstsein”; cfr. Sabine Schiller-Lerg, *Walter Benjamin und der Rundfunk. Programmarbeit zwischen Theorie und Praxis* (Munich: Saur, 1984), p. 206.

¹¹⁹ Werner Klippert, *Elemente des Hörspiels* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1977), p. 3.

¹²⁰ Cfr. Götz Schmedes, *Medientext Hörspiel. Ansätze einer Hörspielsemiotik am Beispiel der Radioarbeiten von Alfred Behrens* (Berlin: Waxmann, 2002), p. 22ff. See also: *Radio-Kultur und Hör-Kunst zwischen Avantgarde und Popularkunst 1923-2001*, edited by Andreas Stuhlmann (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2001).



ganda, *Urlaub vom Tod*, together with the oratorio *Jemand*, should be considered to be among the most interesting of the exiled author's militantly anti-Nazi works. Created for the radio transmission *Treasury Parade* ("eine Sendereihe des Finanzministeriums, die für die Zeichnung von Kriegsanleihen werben sollte"),¹²¹ it was transmitted that same year in English (*Furlough from Death*); a German version followed on the program *We Fight Back*, which had been founded by Manfred George and Ernst Joseph Aufricht in order to make the American public familiar with the works of German authors in exile:

Einakter von Brecht, Ödön von Horvath, Ferdinand Bruckner wurden dort in deutscher Sprache gesendet. Es war nicht so sehr eine Propagandawaffe gegen die amerikanischen Nazis als ein Mittel der Identifizierung. Wir wollten sagen, wer wir waren, es war unser Beitrag zum Krieg.¹²²

Condensed into only twenty minutes, the one act of *Urlaub vom Tod*²³ thematizes the question of collective German guilt by way of a portrait of a family ravaged by the war. In the opening scenes we are presented with an intimate sketch of a family that has come together in the attempt to preserve a sense of normality by means of ordinary gestures which, considered in the context of the fury of events, cover the characters in a sinister patina of alienation. At the same time, in a sort of acoustic *mise en abîme*, a radio transmits bulletins from the Russian front while a maid obeys the orders of her mistress, Frau Müller, who is waiting for her son to return on furlough to celebrate his birthday as he had promised. A simple dinner has been prepared for the occasion, and the maid has tidied up his room so that he will find everything as it was before he left. The *Führer's* portrait still hangs on the wall, the books are on their shelves, and the walls have been touched up. She reminds us of the young

¹²¹ Hans Sahl, *Das Exil im Exil* (Frankfurt a.M.: Luchterhand, 1990), p. 110.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ Hans Sahl, *Urlaub vom Tod. Ein Hörspiel*, in *Deutsche Theaterleute im amerikanischen Exil. Ausstellung* (Hamburg: Universität Hamburg, mit der Unterstützung der Amerikagesellschaft e. V., 1976), pp. 79-87.



lover of flower's touching sentimentalism: "Frau Müller vergessen nicht, dass der junge Herr Schnittblumen nicht mag", she says, "der junge Herr hat ein so gutes Herz. Er sagte immer: Menschen darf man töten, wenn es das höhere Interesse verlangt. Blumen nicht. Das Leben einer Blume ist heilig, sagte er".¹²⁴ And yet the climate of terror renders the individual characters' quiet contrived, a climate evoked by the exchanges between the maid and Frau Müller, the former well aware of the truth of the events and casualties at the front, the latter preoccupied with evading reality in the same way the authorities have done with their radio transmissions of false hopes. In response to his wife who's clearly preoccupied with asking about the "schlechte Nachrichten" from the front, Herr Müller says: "Du wirst mich noch ins KZ bringen. Militärische Maßnahmen, die aus strategischen Gründen erfolgen, dürften wohl kaum unter den Begriff 'schlechte Nachrichten' fallen".¹²⁵

Within a context in which one has been forced to renounce any misgivings whatsoever, the survivor's sudden appearance in *Urlaub vom Tod* is like a cloudburst. Pale and shivering, his helmet down over his face, Martin answers his mother's questions with a curt "mir ist kalt".¹²⁶ His mother and the maid are immediately concerned, as both have recognized his disorientation, and they appear in a sort of counterpoint to the comrade-like manner with which his father greets him: "Willkommen daheim, mein Junge. Hast du dich gut gehalten. Dein Vater ist stolz auf dich. Lange Reise, was? Tag und Nacht gefahren, wie? Na, wirst dich schon erholen".¹²⁷ The next scene, however, sees the father's confidence destroyed, and the mother's fears confirmed while the rapid dialogue gives a sense of the immense tragedy that cannot be dismissed. Urged by his father to resign himself and to consider the war "ein Kinderspiel" Martin replies "Nein Vater, ich lebe nicht mehr",¹²⁸ when asked by his mother to remove his helmet he answers: "Ich habe kein Gesicht mehr,

¹²⁴ *Ivi*, p. 80.

¹²⁵ *Ivi*, p. 81.

¹²⁶ *Ivi*, p. 82.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ *Ivi*, p. 83.



Mutter”.¹²⁹ Martin’s ever more disconcerting responses to his parents’ pressing questions conclude with the stark revelation: “Ich habe aufgehört, ein Mensch zu sein [...]. Ich bin ein toter Soldat”.¹³⁰

This declaration, however, does not precede any outburst on the conditions he suffered in the war, but it does reveal a truth, which, even if absurd, is the only one possible: the survivor has indeed returned on furlough, but his is only a *vacation from death*. The tragedy at this point is anything but concluded, and Martin’s revelation is the beginning of an urgent *j’accuse* against that generation of fathers guilty of having hidden the reality of war from their sons. The survivor, by now turned vengeful spirit, has come home to “call into account” not only his own death but that of the thousands of other children who had believed in their fathers (note the use of the collective “wir”):

Als wir auszogen, dachten wir, es wäre für Deutschland, und Deutschland ist unbesiegbar. Wir haben die Fahne des Führers durch ganz Europa getragen [...] Wir haben Völker liquidiert und Nationen von der Landkarte weggewischt. Und nun? Was jetzt? Noch mehr Hassen und Gehasstwerden, noch mehr Töten und Getötetwerden? Warum habt ihr mir das angetan? Warum habt ihr, meine Eltern, mir nicht die Wahrheit gesagt?¹³¹

At the beginning Mr. Müller responds to his son’s accusations by referring to the unavoidability of events: “Es kam eine Krankheit über uns. Ein verlorener Krieg. Sieben Millionen Arbeitslose. Eine Republik, die sich selbst aufgab. Ich habe auch nur getan, was die anderen taten. Ich konnte mich nicht ausschließen”.¹³² Yet when Martin reminds him of how the entire world now hates the Germans (quite successful, from a formal point of view, the distant echo *in sottofondo* of oppressed peoples chanting their lament in different tongues), his father renounces all the lies and issues a *mea culpa* encompassing the entire nation:

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ivi*, p. 84.

¹³² *Ivi*, p. 85.



Ja, ich weiß, sie hassen uns. Aber es gibt kein Zurück mehr. Wir alle sind zu Komplizen eines Verbrechens gemacht worden. Jeder weiß es von jedem, und jeder hat jeden in der Hand. Das macht aus uns eine Gemeinschaft – eine Gemeinschaft von Mitwissern. Wir alle sind Gefangene. Deutschland ist ein einziges Konzentrationslager.¹³³

With *Urlaub vom Tod* Sahl affirmed his intention to “in dem ich die These von der Kollektivschuld zurückwies und einen Unterschied machte zwischen Deutschen und Nazis”.¹³⁴ Apart from the author’s reaction to the *Schuldfrage*, which he was to confront in later poetic productions as well, the clearest difference between *Urlaub vom Tod* and other eloquent examples of *Heimkehrerliteratur* is in the context in which it was born: exile. *Urlaub vom Tod* is not a survivor’s play like Wolfgang Borchert’s *Draußen vor der Tür* (1947), nor is it a *reportage* on the Russian campaign like Theodor Plevier’s *Stalingrad* (1945). Written and then broadcast while the war was already underway, Sahl’s radio drama does not force the listener to revisit the horrors *à rebour*, but to intensely confront an ongoing reality. Sometimes the drama responds to historical events by questioning whether the Germans indeed share a collective guilt, while at others it issues an urgent and desperate appeal to revolt. Martin’s final words before leaving his parents’ home suggest the imminent uprising of all German soliders against those who had sent them to the slaughter:

Dann werden wir alle draußen versammelt sein. Viele tote Soldaten. Eine ganze Armee. Und wir werden den Weg zurückgehen, den wir gekommen sind, Augen geradeaus, Bajonett gefällt, die Sterne über uns und das Banner der Freiheit im Nacken.¹³⁵

Written during the war as well, most likely between 1941 and 1945, *Gegen den Sturm* – the *Hörspiel* comprises a total of six complete typewritten pages residing in the archives – relates the author’s ex-

¹³³ *Ivi*, p. 86.

¹³⁴ Hans Sahl, *Das Exil im Exil*, cit., p. 111.

¹³⁵ Hans Sahl, *Urlaub vom Tod*, cit., p. 87.



perience of waiting in Marseille and in Lisbon before setting sail for the United States. In 1940, after being interred in two French work camps (one of which he shared with Walter Benjamin) and an exhausting escape from German troops, Sahl made it to the free port of Marseilles, the only one (other than Lisbon) from which refugees could hope to leave Europe. Just as it is described in the pages of Anna Seghers' novel *Transit*, the city was the seat of numerous consulates¹³⁶ and received thousands of refugees exhausted by the terror and seemingly interminable waiting times for visas. For Sahl, Marseilles represented not only a place of salvation, but also a concrete commitment to other intellectuals in danger. There he collaborated with Varian Fry¹³⁷ at the *Centre Américain de Secours* (CAS), a clandestine assistance cell founded in New York (*Emergency Rescue Committee*) at the instigation of Erika Mann and other intellectuals with the goal of facilitating the escape of artists and intellectuals from Europe.¹³⁸ Sahl's work consisted in "Berichte [...] zu verfassen" on the CAS's work, "die Washington veranlassen sollten, die Hilfsorganisationen für die Flüchtlinge zu beschleunigen",¹³⁹ and reducing waiting times, which for some would have been fatal. At the beginning of March 1941, Sahl too set sail from Marseilles for Lisbon, where he was to wait for more than a month before being able to board the "Guinee", one of the last ships to leave Lisbon for the United States. The Portuguese city did not present refugees with a dif-

¹³⁶ Cfr. Hans-Albert Walter, *Deutsche Exilliteratur 1933-1950*, vol. III: *Internierung, Flucht und Lebensbedingungen im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1988), p. 302ff.

¹³⁷ On the "fisher of men from Marseilles", as Hertha Pauli has defined him in *Der Riß der Zeit geht durch mein Herz. Ein Erlebnisbuch* (Vienna: Zsolnay, 1970), p. 229, there is an extensive biography. Here we shall mention only: Varian Fry, *Surrender on Demand* (New York: Random House, 1945), the memoirs in which Fry offers a detailed reconstruction on the CAS's activities in Marseilles; and the short but complete portrait by Julijana Ranc, *Odysseus und Don Quichotte – Zum hundertsten Geburtstag von Varian Fry (1907-1967)*, in "Exil. Forschung, Erkenntnisse. Ergebnisse", XXVII (2007), pp. 5-39.

¹³⁸ In August 1940 Fry set sail from New York with a list of 200 names. Thanks to his contribution, the CAS saved the lives of over 7000 refugees, among whom figured: Hannah Arendt, Marc Chagall, Lion Feuchtwanger, Arthur Koestler, Claude Levi-Strauss, Heinrich Mann, Golo Mann, Valeriu Marcu, Walter Mehring, Alfred Polgar, Franz Werfel and others.

¹³⁹ Hans Sahl, *Das Exil im Exil*, cit., p. 93.



ferent perspective from that of Marseilles: long waiting times for boarding passes, shady deals to secure ever rarer places on ships. Sahl describes Lisbon as a city so completely immersed in chaos that Marseilles in contrast seemed to be “ein Puppenstübchen”.¹⁴⁰

In Lisbon there were rescue centers for refugees (Fry himself founded the *Unitarian Service Committee* there) too.¹⁴¹ In the radio-drama *Gegen den Sturm* Sahl provides a portrait of life within one of those *Flüchtlingsheime* through the figure of a volunteer, Lisa Beck, who seems to be a composite of the indefatigable CAS stenographers and secretaries Miriam Davenport and Mary Jayne Gold.¹⁴² It is Lisa's wedding day, yet work in the *Flüchtlingsheim* continues on unabated, and she readies herself for the ceremony with speedy sobriety. There are no bridesmaids or family members with the bride-to-be, only Charlotte, a little refugee who has lost all of her family in the bombing raids in London. In Charlotte and Lisa's dialogue one notes how the precarious state has removed any glimmer of hope for the future even from the young, as the girl asks: “Glauben Sie, daß es wieder richtige Hochzeiten geben wird, wenn ich erwachsen bin?”.¹⁴³ But the heroine of the drama counters Charlotte's disillusionment with the promises of a bright future within the American dream:

Hoffentlich... (Plötzlich) *Natürlich* wird es wieder richtige Hochzeiten geben, natürlich wird es geben, Charlotte. Und wenn du dich in Amerika verheiratest, dann bestehe ich darauf, dein Trauzeuge zu sein.¹⁴⁴

And thus, at the moment Lisa offers hope in place of desperation and the darkness of war, she demonstrates being *against the tide* just

¹⁴⁰ DLA-Marbach, A: Sahl/Briefe/Brief von Hans Sahl an Siemsen, Lisbon, 27/3/1941 [741032].

¹⁴¹ Cfr. Anne Klein, *Flüchtlingspolitik und Flüchtlingshilfe 1940-1942. Varian Fry und die Komitees zur Rettung politisch Verfolgter in New York und Marseille* (Berlin: Metropol, 2007), p. 10.

¹⁴² Of the fifteen members of the CAS, two were women. Fry himself provides an appreciative portrait of them in his memoirs. Cfr. Anne Klein, *op. cit.*, p. 191ff.

¹⁴³ DLA-Marbach, A:Sahl/Dramatisches/Hörspiele/Gegen den Sturm.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*



as the title of the radio drama has announced. Indeed, Lisa angrily responds to Charlotte's sense of disillusionment and says: "Gebt diesen Kindern zurück, was ihr ihnen genommen habt! Gebt ihnen, was ihnen gebührt: eine vernünftige Welt. Eine richtige Welt! [...] Lasst sie nicht unsere Fehler und Irrtümer nachmachen"¹⁴⁵

A red thread of hope connects three generations of women: the little girl Charlotte, Lisa Beck, and the older Frau Kaufmann. The elderly Frau Kaufmann, with whom Lisa speaks prior to her wedding ceremony, remembers her own wedding day in quieter and happier times. Just as Lisa had given hope to Charlotte, so Frau Kaufmann leads Lisa to recover a sense of humanity that seemed to be crumbling away by looking back to a time unaffected by war and the darkness of Nazism. In the drama's final lines the author imagines a better world:

Die ganze Welt wird wieder von vorne anfangen müssen, wenn dieser Krieg zu Ende ist.... dort anfangen, wo unsere Väter und Großväter einst aufhörten, dort, wo die Bill of Rights und die Menschenrechte verkündet wurden... Und wir haben bereits von vorne angefangen. Der große Krieg gegen die Feinde der Menschheit ist im Gange. Wir haben Opfer gebracht, und wir werden nicht aufhören, Opfer zu bringen, bis die Welt so ist, wie wir sie wollen: eine Welt des Friedens, der Freiheit und der Toleranz.¹⁴⁶

Memories of his time in Marseilles are at the center of a play that was not conceived for the radio, but for the theatre. *Die Füße der Anderen*¹⁴⁷ is a one-act play preserved on nine typewritten pages that most likely dates to the middle of the 1960s. It features two nameless figures, a man and a woman, who are similarly designated only as "he" and "she". The two are engaged in conversation onboard a ship with the evocative name of "Esperanza" during a brief trip "[mit dem] Blick auf die unvergessliche Alpenkette" upon a Swiss lake or river.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ DLA-Marbach, A:Sahl/Dramatisches/Hörspiele/Die Füße der Anderen.



The two conversant figures – who as the title states are literally below *the passing of others' feet* (“ihr Kommen und Gehen, ihr Ausstampfen, etc., kann vom Regisseur kontrapunktisch in Beziehung zum Dialog gesetzt werden”)¹⁴⁸– seem immersed in a space outside of time. After a separation of twenty years, the two, who once were lovers, recall the time they first met and then their subsequent separation. The male figure clearly resembles the author: exiled in New York, at one time a collaborator in a refugee center in Marseilles, married, and with children. The two had met in Marseilles, she a refugee and he an assistant, they had become involved, and they had pledged eternal love. However, the amount of time spent waiting for a visa annihilated the tie. He chastises her with certain words: “Du hast ebenfalls auf dein Visum gewartet, aber meins kam früher, und ich musste fort. Ich wartete auf Dich in New York, ich wartete sechs Wochen lang auf meine Verlobte. Aber meine Verlobte hatte auf der Überfahrt einen anderen Mann kennengelernt und sich mit ihm verlobt”;¹⁴⁹ she blames everything on a cruel fate, that of exile.

The files related to the “Funktspiel”¹⁵⁰ *Ein amerikanischer Sommer*, an unfinished text most likely composed toward the end of the 1960s, suggest a lively, ironic portrait of the life of the exile who by that point had become an American citizen. The setting suggests similarities to Sahl’s house on Sag Harbor, Long Island, which he had acquired after the birth of his first son Mark Tobias¹⁵¹ and where, in no way at odds with the *vox loquens* of the text, he and his family typically spent the summer months. Furthermore, one can deduce from the lines of the poem *Das Haus auf Long Island* that their home was

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ In the file that contains the seven typewritten pages one finds the following information: “Als Funkspiel geplant, unvollendet”. Cfr. DLA-Marbach, A:Sahl/Dramatisches/Ein amerikanischer Sommer.

¹⁵¹ In 1959 Sahl met his future partner Melinda Albrecht. She was thirty years younger and had also arrived in America from Germany during the war, gravely suffering from anorexia and plagued by serious depressive episodes. The marriage took place in 1961 and lasted until 1984 when the two were divorced. They had three sons: Stephan Andreas (1962, who died shortly after birth), Mark Tobias (1964) and Timothy Sebastian (1965).



also modest: “Mein Garten auf Long Island hat 12 Obstbäume / Die Raupen der Zigeunermotte fraßen sie auf. / Termiten nagen an den Grundfesten meines / auf Abzahlung gekauften Hauses. / Es ist eine gute Kapitalanlage, / sagen die Leute”.¹⁵² The garden of the house described in the poem arises in the theatre from the difficult coexistence between two families, the Armstrongs and the Mackintoshes, divided only by a fence. The surviving scenes of the text describe the daily life of these two neighboring families divided by economic differences and the suspicions of a typical American bourgeois family (the Mackintoshes) toward its less well-to-do neighbors (the Armstrongs). Sketching some scenes of their everyday life, Mr. Armstrong lingers on the prejudice of his neighbors that lurks beneath a thin veil of hypocrisy:

Unsere Häuser standen so nahe beieinander, dass man fast jedes Wort hören konnte, das drüben gesprochen wurde. So blieb uns denn auch nicht verborgen, dass die Mackintoshs etwas gegen uns hatten. Sie liessen es sich jedoch nicht anmerken.¹⁵³

Too little remains of the text to be able to offer hypotheses as to why the Mackintoshes are so hostile toward their neighbors; nevertheless, it is interesting to recognize how the formal aspect of the piece attests to a high level of awareness of the most efficacious strategies for radio broadcast.

Almost as if to obviate the lack of visual points of support, the narration given to Mr. Armstrong, who asserts himself as a unique *vox loquens*, seizes upon the spatial deixis: “Hier ist das Haus, das wir für den Sommer gemietet hatten. [...] Hier sind sie: Mr. und Mrs. Mackintosh, gehobener Mittelstand, Eigentumswohnung in Manhattan, Station-Wagen, Ruderboot mit Außenmotor”.¹⁵⁴ After introducing his family (his wife and his five-year-old son Stocky), the context of the house on Long Island, and his neighbors, Mr. Ar-

¹⁵² Hans Sahl, *Das Haus auf Long Island*, in *Wir sind die Letzten. Gedichte* (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1976), p. 57.

¹⁵³ DLA-Marbach, A:Sahl/Dramatisches/Ein amerikanischer Sommer.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*



mstrong then turns to his eventual radio listener with a sort of *captatio benevolentiae*. He interacts with this virtual listener as if they were a family friend invited over to look at a photo album or family video, and he spares no detail:

Wir waren diesen Sommer auf Long Island und haben dort einige Aufnahmen gemacht, die Sie vielleicht interessieren werden. Wir haben auch einen kleinen 8-mm-Film gedreht, von dem wir Ihnen ein paar Ausschnitte zeigen können, falls die Zeit reicht. – Hier ist eine Landkarte von Long Island...¹⁵⁵

Once again, the process of intermedial interference between vision and acoustics exposes a studied strategy of ways to keep the listener's attention.

As opposed to the three previously discussed *Hörspiele*, all of which are in some way related to the author's *hic et nunc* (the experience of war, exile, and the confrontation with American culture), *Die Geschichte des vierten Weisen aus Morgenland*¹⁵⁶ leaves historical facts behind in order to concentrate on religious myth. The complete one-act *Hörspiel* is comprised of fifteen typewritten pages. It is, however, difficult to specify when it may have been written; that stated, the use of English in the musical direction could only have coincided with the author's arrival in New York, a detail which could prove indicative. The radio drama seems to be close to the author's thoughts in the years in which, disillusioned by communism, he tried to salvage the values of Christianity, above all, love for one's neighbor. As Reiter makes clear,¹⁵⁷ after his break with communism and the reading of Silone's *Vino e Pane*, Sahl turned to Christianity as a form of ethical teaching. "Als Jude bin ich Christ, als Christ Jude",¹⁵⁸ Sahl later wrote in his diary, confirming not the calling of an assimilated Jew

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ DLA-Marbach, A:Sahl/Dramatisches/Die Geschichte des vierten Weisen aus Morgenland.

¹⁵⁷ Andrea Reiter, *Die Exterritorialität des Denkens. Hans Sahl im Exil* (Göttingen: Wallstein 2007), p. 152.

¹⁵⁸ *Ivi*, p. 153.



to religious syncretism, but a problematic conversation with those roots that had been negated by an education strongly in line with German culture but one which did not preclude Christianity.

The *Hörspiel* revolves around the figure of Artaban, the fourth of the magi, who was unable to reach Bethlehem in time to bring his gifts to the Christ child. From the missing meeting to the search for a new possibility of encountering Christ, Artaban derives a teaching unwritten in any law: love of one's neighbor, a law he feels is the only one that could make up for that lack. From the beginning of the play it seems that an invisible hand is leading Artaban to believe that the only way to serve God is that of taking care of his fellow man. On his way to Bethlehem he is stopped by an old beggar. Artaban knows this will keep him from meeting the other magi and possibly even Christ, but a voice convinces him to stop: "Gott, sage du mir, was ich tun soll. Wenn ich diesen Alten hier liegen lasse, wird er sterben. Wenn ich bleibe, bei ihm bleibe, komme ich zu spät. Sie werden ohne mich die Reise antreten".¹⁵⁹

Only by seeking the Christ child in every corner of the world, by helping every single person in need he meets upon his way, is Artaban able to still his longing: "Von Land zu Land ging er, von Stadt zu Stadt. Dort, wo das Elend wohnte, und die Hungersnot, und die Pest, und die Armut. Wo immer Menschen erduldeten, dorthin ging Artaban, suchend...suchend".¹⁶⁰ For thirty years Artaban does nothing but come to the aid of suffering humanity. Old and exhausted, he finally reaches Jerusalem on the day of the crucifixion. A little girl who has been reduced to slavery he meets on the road explains to him the reason for the long procession towards Golgotha: Pilate has condemned Jesus to death. Though he is tired, Artaban rejoices at the idea of being able to see his Lord at least once and is ready to make it to Golgotha in order to bring him the last of his remaining gifts, a pearl. But the little girl holds him back by begging for his help. And so, yet again, Artaban must decide between Christ and his neighbor: "Mein Kind, diese Perle ist mein letzter Schatz. Es ist alles,

¹⁵⁹ DLA-Marbach, A:Sahl/Dramatisches/Die Geschichte des vierten Weisen aus Morgenland.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*



was ich noch besitze, und ich habe es für den König aufgehoben. Pause. Nimm sie! (Schwer) Es ist...dein Lösegeld!"¹⁶¹ The earthquake which shakes the ground following Christ's death kills Artaban too, who, however, has become a paradigm of true Christian love.

Hitler

Three typewritten texts are all that remain of a planned play about Hitler.¹⁶² Two of them (quite damaged) are made up of various scenes and a schematic sketch; the third contains the play's beginnings. In order to have an overall idea of the project, it is necessary to compare the texts. From the project's outline it is clear that the play intended to tell the human and political story of Adolf Hitler from his childhood up through the eruption of the war. The lack of a section dedicated to his demise might suggest that the piece was conceived prior to Hitler's death; and in the introduction the speaker's voice, in fact, confirms as much: "Leider konnte das letzte Kapitel noch nicht geschrieben werden, das die Verhaftung und Bestrafung des Verbrechers erzählt. Wir hoffen aber, dies in Kürze, bestimmt nach vor Ende dieses Jahres, nachzuholen".¹⁶³ The play was most likely written, therefore, between the end of 1944 (the *terminus ante quem* might be the essay *Hitler oder die Demaskierung einer Epoche*,¹⁶⁴ which dates to 1943) and 1945 (the *terminus post quem* would be 30 April 1945). The fact that Hitler was presented as a criminal being sought throughout the world at the age of 57 (which he only would have been in 1946), simply suggests authorial oversight. In the introduction, Sahl reveals why he intended to tell the human side of the dictator's story, a story he by that point considered a "Kriminalroman":

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² DLA-Marbach, A:Sahl/Dramatisches/Hitler.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ The essay, first conceived in 1943, was published only in 1991. Cfr. Hans Sahl, *Hitler oder die Demaskierung einer Epoche*, in "Und doch...", cit., pp. 10-20.



Sie hören jetzt den größten Kriminalroman aller Zeiten: die Geschichte Adolf Hitlers, geschrieben auf Grund seiner Autobiographie “Mein Kampf” und unter Benutzung der historischen Dokumente, sowie der Bücher von Konrad Heiden, Hermann Rauschning und Ludwig Wagner.¹⁶⁵ Es ist ein wahrer Kriminalroman, kein erfundener.¹⁶⁶

The play was supposed to unfold over four acts: the first and only one conserved was to deal with Hitler’s youth; the second with the period between the First World War and its immediate aftermath up through the establishment of the Republic of Weimar and the Treaty of Versailles; the third on the phases of his coming to power, from the Beerhall Putsch up through his nomination as Chancellor; the last on the key moments of the development and consolidation of power, from the burning of the Reichstag to Röhm’s assassination; the final scenes would have told of the tragedy of the Holocaust and the war.

A speaker introduces the first scene (the structure of the text, however, is too large to be able to hypothesize about its configuration as a radio drama). This decision emphasizes the *pathos* of a message aimed at all of humanity still under threat from the “criminal” Hitler:

Achtung! Achtung! An alle Radiostationen der Welt! Gesucht wird ein Mann, 57 Jahre alt, unverheiratet, angeklagt wegen Mord, Raub, Erpressung, Überfall und anderen [...] *an der Menschheit begangenen Verbrechen!* Er trägt einen kleinen, schwarzen Schnurrbart und geht nur in Begleitung seiner Leibwache aus. Er ist heimtückisch, grausam, böse und schreckt vor keiner Gewalttat zurück. Wer ihn fängt, tot oder lebendig, wird dafür belohnt werden, die Menschheit von einem Ungeheuer befreit zu haben.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ Konrad Heiden, *Hitler* (New York: AMS Press, 1936); Ludwig Wagner, *Hitler. Man of Strife* (New York: Norton, 1942); Hermann Rauschning, *Gespräche mit Hitler* (New York: Europe Verlag, 1940).

¹⁶⁶ DLA-Marbach, A:Sahl/Dramatisches/Hitler/Typoskript II.

¹⁶⁷ DLA-Marbach, A:Sahl/Dramatisches/Hitler.



In the few preserved scenes there is talk of the family environment in which Hitler grew up and his premature psychological defects. One immediately gets the impression that the future dictator's cruelty is at times idiopathic, and at times exacerbated by his father's brutality. A terrible student, unloved by his peers, the young Hitler passes his days alone, torturing helpless insects and dreaming of war-like deeds:

Er liebte seine Mitschüler nicht, und seine Mitschüler liebten ihn nicht. Sogar seine Mutter hatte Angst vor ihm, denn er war von undurchsichtigem und launischem Wesen. Oft lag er, wenn die andern spielten unter einem Baum und träumte von künftigem Ruhm, von Schlachtenlärm, Kanonendonner und von dem Röcheln der Sterbenden.¹⁶⁸

Young Adolf's personality even eludes his mother, who nevertheless observes his destructive and sadistic tendencies – in the first scene we see the child tear the wings off an insect and then answer his mother's reproach (“warum bist du so grausam, Adolf?”) with laconic coldness: “Die Natur ist auch grausam, Mutter”.¹⁶⁹ The picture shifts to a pub where Adolf's alcoholic and aggressive father is hitting his son and publicly accusing him of not having done his homework and of lying – even his mother had accused him of being a liar, almost as if to suggest that the future dictator's true nature could be explained by a pathological tendency to lying. Adolf's reaction to his father's death, following an explosion of anger he himself had caused, exposes all of the vindictiveness of this future “criminal” thirsty for revenge and void of human compassion: “Er ist tot. Er kann mich nicht mehr schlagen... Von jetzt ab wird mich niemand mehr schlagen...niemand...niemand”.¹⁷⁰

The second scene finds Adolf now a young artist longing for confirmation. Having reached the Academy of Fine Arts and confident of being admitted, he instead receives the crushing blow of

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*



rejection from a professor: “Ihre Zeichnungen sind abgelehnt”. In a vindictive manner suggestive of his criminal acts to come, Hitler responds: “Sie werden von mir hören, wenn meine Stunde gekommen ist...Mögen Sie nie bereuen, mich fortgeschickt zu haben...”.¹⁷¹ The scenes’ *vox loquens* suggests that the future dictator’s cruelty was made worse by what would prove to be a deadly chain of events, which frustrated and destroyed any hope the artist had in possessing any talent:

Man soll nie die Zeichnungen eines künftigen Diktators ablehnen! Wie viel Unheil wäre der Welt erspart geblieben, wenn die Wiener Kunstakademie dem Schüler Adolf Hitler ein Stipendium gewährt hätte. Vielleicht wäre er heute Zeichenlehrer in einer Mädchenschule, hätte einen kleinen Gemüsegarten und spielte am Sonntag Skat mit dem Rabbiner. Vielleicht...vielleicht auch nicht! [...] Furchtbarer hat noch kein lebendes Wesen Rache genommen an einer Umwelt, die ihm den Weg nach oben versperrte – und darum vernichtet werden sollte...Sie werden von mir hören, Herr Professor...¹⁷²

Through these two scenes the tone of the psychological drama the author had already begun with his *Scenario* on Van Gogh emerges. However, we do not know how the character’s individual destiny would have been illustrated within the context of historical events.

Hausmusik and *Rubinstein*: the dramas of the Jewish-German dialogue

It is to the dramatic form that Sahl entrusts the confrontation with his Jewish origins, and he does so initially in an autobiographical piece, *Hausmusik. Eine Szenenfolge* (1980), a work which offers a “characterology” of the assimilated Jewish bourgeoisie in the early 20th century. This confrontation is continued in the inquisitorial sce-

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² *Ibid.*



nes of *Rubinstein oder der Bayreuther Totentanz* (1990) in which the “Katz-und-Maus-Spiel”¹⁷³ between Wagner and his Jewish collaborators (the orchestral conductor Hermann Levi and the pianist Joseph Rubinstein), offers Sahl the spark for investigating both Wagner’s anti-Semitic psychology and the most obscure tendencies of Judaism in the phase of its emancipation.

Growing up in Berlin in a home of rich assimilated Jews, Sahl (at the time Hans Salomon)¹⁷⁴ had an ambivalent attitude toward his origins, at times nostalgia for a universe that had been denied him by a German-based education, and at times a problematic distance:

Heute beklage ich, dass mir im Elternhaus das jüdische Erbe vor-
enthalten blieb, die Schönheit der chassidischen Legenden, die log-
gistischen Gedankenspiele des Talmud, dass ich nicht mit Scholem
Alechem aufwuchs, sondern “nur” mit Wagner, Schumann, Mozart
und dem Bamberger Reiter.¹⁷⁵

As a representative of exile, on multiple occasions Sahl maintains that he left Germany “nicht als Jude, sondern als Gegner Hitlers”. As a writer he could not stand being labeled a “Jewish author” and was proud of claiming to belong to German literature, from which context he did not want to be removed: “Darf ich Sie ersuchen”, he once asked a journalist during an interview, “mich nicht mehr als ‘jü-

¹⁷³ Theodor Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner* (Munich: Knaur, 1964), p. 16 (an expression Adorno uses in regard to the collaboration between Wagner and Hermann Levi).

¹⁷⁴ Sahl published his earliest stories and some of his theatre and film criticism under his family name of Salomon. Starting in 1925 he began to use the (more German-sounding) pseudonym Hans Sahl, at that time abbreviated as “H. S.”, cfr. *Hans Sahl. Eine Bibliographie seiner Schriften*, edited by Gregor Ackermann and Momme Brodersen (Marbach: Deutsche Schillergesellschaft, 1995). He still used his family name on the identity card he was issued in Paris in 1936, though together with the Germanized pseudonym: “Nom: *Salomon dit Sahl*” (DLA-Marbach/A:Sahl/ZugehörigeMaterialien/Reisepässe/Carte d’identité). However, this has disappeared altogether by the time of his American passport, where one finds only his pseudonym preceded by the doctor title “*Dr. Hans Sahl*” (DLA-Marbach/A:Sahl/ ZugehörigeMaterialien/Reisepässe/Passport, United States of America 1960-1964).

¹⁷⁵ Hans Sahl, *Memoiren eines Moralisten*, cit., p. 42.



dischen Schriftsteller' vorzustellen?"¹⁷⁶ His parents' origins (his father, Paul Salomon, was a banker and commercial advisor, his mother, Anna Maaß, a descendant of the assimilated Jewish haute bourgeoisie) had almost no influence on the young Sahl's education, his *Bildung* was completely in line with that of the best German tradition. His grandfather, Leopold Salomon, had already belonged to the *Jüdische Reformgemeinde*, "l'ala più radicale dell'ebraismo liberale [...] fondata nel 1845 per eliminare dalla pratica religiosa ebraica usanze che sembravano essere in contrasto con la cittadinanza tedesca",¹⁷⁷ and as a member of the *Verband deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens* he practiced according to the most liberal forms removed from intransigent orthodoxy. If, as Mosse has observed, "il processo di assimilazione impegnò la maggior parte delle energie degli ebrei tedeschi, nello sforzo di adeguarsi alla società tedesca e di far fronte alla loro ebraicità [...] sbarazzandosi di quelle che venivano chiamate 'peculiarità ebraiche', modificando la pratica dell'ebraismo ortodosso, usi e abbigliamenti ebraici", for more than a century that force would imply "una radicale trasformazione della personalità, delle abitudini, degli atteggiamenti": "Gli ebrei dovevano diventare patrioti, imparare le buone maniere e la morale della società ben educata nella quale si sarebbero emancipati e la cui mentalità avrebbero dovuto assumere".¹⁷⁸ The Weimar Republic had completed the Jews' formal emancipation, who, as Sahl would show in *Hausmusik*, had divested

¹⁷⁶ Momme Brodersen, *Schreiben nach Auschwitz: Hans Sahl*, in "Exil. Forschung. Erkenntnisse. Ergebnisse", XIV (1994), n. 2, pp. 5-12, here p. 5.

¹⁷⁷ George Mosse, *Ebrei in Germania fra assimilazione e antisemitismo* (Florence: La Giuntina, 1991), p. 72. ("The most radical wing of liberal Judaism [...] founded in 1845 to eliminate customs from Jewish religious practice that seemed to be in conflict with German citizenship"). Unless otherwise noted, translations by the present translator.

¹⁷⁸ *Ivi*, pp. 9-12. ("The process of assimilation would take up a major part of the energy of German Jews, in the pressure to adapt themselves to German society and to face their Jewishness [...] liberating themselves from those so-called 'Jewish peculiarities', modifying the practice of orthodox Judaism, Jewish customs, and clothing"); ("a radical transformation of personality, of habits, behaviors"); ("The Jews had to become patriots, learn good manners and the morals of the well-polished society in which they would be emancipated and which mentality they were to assume").



themselves of their own distinctive cultural features in order to become “preußischer sein als die Preußen”: liberal citizens, patriots, and culturally formed. The two dramas of his later years do not, therefore, deal with the merely autobiographical bond of negated origins, but sound out the tragedy of a dialogue, the Jewish-German one, which had been revealed to be illusory and destined to be tragically interrupted by Auschwitz. In *Hausmusik* the author presents a picture of a typical bourgeois family of assimilated Jews in the years before the First World War, years in which one hoped for a possible “geistige Osmose”.¹⁷⁹ In that sense *Hausmusik* represents “die Tragikomödie einer Illusion, die in Auschwitz endete”:¹⁸⁰ the Jewish bourgeoisie’s illusion of being, as the patriotic Bukofzer would declare in the play, “in erster Linie Deutscher und in zweiter Jude”.¹⁸¹ To such a double-identity sought by various characters in the play, an identity that affirmed belonging ‘*in prima linea*’ to German culture, Rabbi Gottschalk’s few but trenchant barbs establish a counter melody, as when he chastises the too liberal Felix Rosengarten’s for having denied his children a Jewish education, and with the following words unmasks the naivete behind assimilated Judaism:

Aber ihr preußischen Juden wollt preußischer sein als die Preußen. Ihr glaubt, daß, um akzeptiert zu werden, ihr mehr arbeiten, mehr Geld verdienen, mehr Gutes tun müßt als man von Euch erwartet. Ihr gleicht einem verfolgten Tier, das die Schutzfärbung seiner Umgebung annimmt, um nicht erkannt zu werden. Aber ihr habt euch getäuscht. Ich sehe den Tag kommen, da aus den germanischen Wäldern die Horden Wotans mit Äxten und Hellebarden gegen euch aufstehen werden, und es wird ein furchtbarer Tag sein.¹⁸²

It is a given that *Hausmusik* first and foremost amounts to an autobiographical drama. The anamnestic process involves characters,

¹⁷⁹ Hans Sahl, *Memoiren eines Moralisten*, cit., p. 42.

¹⁸⁰ Hans Sahl, *Das Exil im Exil*, cit., p. 209.

¹⁸¹ Here and following I quote from the *Bühnenmanuskript*: Hans Sahl, *Hausmusik* (Bad Homburg: Stefani Hunzinger Bühnenverlag, 1980), here p. 29.

¹⁸² *Ivi*, p. 65.



topographies, events, and psychologies, and gives life to a journey that takes place among images from the author's childhood. In this way the reader can retrace certain correspondences within the drama. As opposed to what takes place in the memoirs, however, – where the narrative voice distinguishes between the past and the present by maintaining a critical distance – in the drama one notes a process of spatial-temporal dilation that interferes on the scene between the present reality of he who is remembering and the past. This interference occurs in the presence of precise scenic choices: the presence of a *vox loquens* (“Der Mann”) – identifiable with the author – which expresses the *continuum* between past and present. As a consequence, the author's autobiographical “I” is not like a passive spectator of those images reawakened by memory and projected again and again onto the scene, but vibrant in its constant interrogation of a past which is ever more present in its consciousness. The analogies Spies¹⁸³ has suggested to the psychological drama of Thornton Wilder, who Sahl admired and also translated, are clearly evident, even if it seems that the coexistence of past and present in the protagonist's consciousness most closely resembles the model of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), another author who Sahl translated.¹⁸⁴ In a similar fashion to the traveling salesman Willy Loman, Sahl too imposes a “contemporaneo confluire di presente e passato nella vita di un essere umano”¹⁸⁵ upon the scene. As opposed to Loman, however, who does not split into two distinct characters, the man in Sahl's scene recognizes the image of himself as a child in the tiny Edgar, an element which allows him to interact with his alter ego.

¹⁸³ Bernhard Spies, *Hans Sahl's Dramen. Die Suche nach dem unbekanntem jüdischen Ich*, in *Integration und Ausgrenzung. Studien zur deutsch-jüdischen Literatur- und Kulturgeschichte von den Frühen Neuzeit bis zur Gegenwart*, edited by Mark Gelber (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2009), pp. 415-428, here p. 417.

¹⁸⁴ From Arthur Miller Sahl translated: *After the Fall* (*Nach dem Sündenfall*, 1964); *Incident at Vichy* (*Zwischenfall in Vichy*, 1965); *The Price* (*Der Preis*, 1968); *The Creation of the World and Other Business* (*Die Erschaffung der Welt und andere Geschäfte*, 1973).

¹⁸⁵ Arthur Miller, *Morte di un commesso viaggiatore*, trans. by Gerardo Guerrieri (Turin: Einaudi, 2012), p. VII. (“Contemporaneous mixture of present and past in the life of a human being”).



With respect to the document kept at Marbach, *Hausmusik. Szenen einer Kindheit*, the *Büchmanuskript* of the text (which carries the subtitle *Eine Szenenfolge*) not only reshapes the psychological aspect connected to the conflictual familial dynamics (the drama surrounding the sister's suicide is certainly more successful in the typewritten version, as is the story of the parents' conjugal conflicts), but tends to fade into a rarefied and even dreamlike atmosphere with the use of cinematographic effects. At the beginning of the play one sees the use of the camera substituting the presence of images in the typewritten version. At the center of the play is a man – the author's alter ego – coming home after many years and standing in the courtyard of what was once his childhood home. Observing the outside of the house, he begins to remember individual episodes from his tranquil youth. In this way the figures from his past take shape and flower forth from his memories: the author's parents are incarnated in Felix and Anna Rosengarten, his sister Käthe in the young Marianne, the author himself in Edgar. Furthermore, various family friends appear: the patriot Bukofzer, the naïve Kleeman, Rabbi Gottschalk, and the spritely grandmother Josepha. The protagonist, however, assumes an ambivalent attitude toward each of them: at times he limits himself to detached observation, at times he steps in with comments but with the awareness of what destiny has in store for them. This is the way, for example, with Marianne, the personification of his sister Käthe who committed suicide in 1955; the protagonist engages in a surreal conversation predicated on the coexistence of past and present. Marianne, in the scene still a young girl ignorant of what her future holds, speaks with him as if he were her little brother Edgar (“Edgar, wo bist du geblieben? Wir haben Dich überall gesucht. Du warst plötzlich verschwunden”),¹⁸⁶ at first the man responds as he would have in his memories (“Ich wollte nicht immer hinter euch herradeln. Wenn du mit deinen Freundinnen zusammen bist, bin ich für dich nicht mehr vorhanden”).¹⁸⁷ Then, however, the pre-

¹⁸⁶ Hans Sahl, *Hausmusik*, cit., p. 11.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*



sent's urgency presses him to question Marianne in full awareness of her tragic end: "Warum hast du es getan? Deine Geschichte war noch lange nicht zu Ende".¹⁸⁸ Marianne, initially hesitant ("Ich weiß nicht wovon du sprichst"),¹⁸⁹ answers peremptorily: "Wenn ein Wasser zu lange kocht, dann verdunstet es. Eines Tages war der Topf leer. Alles verdunstet".¹⁹⁰ The scene is emblematic of many others (consider the questioning of the patriotic Bukofzer, who perished in a concentration camp, who even dead refuses to admit to the Germans' betrayal), and one gets the clear impression that *Hausmusik* is first of all a play of conscience in which the past's plan tends to mingle with and then replace the present.

The basis of this fascinating mental *nekylia* is the "house music" which gives the play its title. The Rosengartens, just like the author's true family, cultivated a passion for the great German musical tradition, hosting friends (also Jewish) in their own home with whom they organized trios and quartets, playing pieces by Schumann, Schubert, and above all Wagner. Wagner's music, which will play a central role in *Rubinstein*, wafts through *Hausmusik* like an evil spell symbolizing the one-sidedness of the Jewish-German dialogue. In the salons of the Jewish haute bourgeoisie where the assimilation of the German world often constituted an objective to be achieved, Wagner's music supplants the religious songs of Jewish tradition, bewitching a substantial group of admirers seemingly unaware of the composer's controversial ideological positions as to the *Judenfrage*.

With the exception of the Rabbi Gottschalk, every character of the play represents precisely the assimilated Jewish bourgeoisie that has suppressed its own Jewish origins. Felix Rosengarten knows of the Talmud only "vom Hörensagen",¹⁹¹ he rides on horseback through the Tiergarten like any German noble, he desires to become a collector and patron, and is convinced that history has reached its turning point in guaranteeing German Jews full assimilation: "Man

¹⁸⁸ *Ivi*, p. 13.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ *Ivi*, p. 43.



kann das Rad der Geschichte nicht zurückdrehen”;¹⁹² Marianne has been raised like every girl of the German bourgeoisie, she plays tennis with the crown prince and believes in a rosey future; Anna Rosengarten, the passionate Wagnerian, believes the difference between Germans and Jews has been overcome: “Ich meine, die Unterschiede zwischen Deutschen christlichen und Deutschen jüdischen Glaubens verwischen sich mehr und mehr. Wer von unseren Freunden hält noch an unseren Feiertagen fest?”.¹⁹³ Little Edgar is proof of such disorientation when in a talk with the Rabbi Gottschalk he is reproached for having abandoned his religious instruction and for not taking the rite of the *Shofar* seriously. The child’s answers to the rabbi’s reproaches lay bare the context in which he has been raised:

Mein Vater sagt, dass solche Gebräuchenicht in unsere Gegenwart passen [...]. Mein Vater sagt, dass ich beide Religionen kennen lernen muss, nicht nur das alte, sondern auch das neue Testament, damit ich selbst entscheiden kann, welche die richtige für mich ist.¹⁹⁴

But the justification the little one gives for having laughed during the religious rite of the *Shofar* is even more significant: “Es war mir - - - fremd”.¹⁹⁵ Edgar’s unfamiliarity with Jewish spirituality expresses the contradictions of the assimilated Jewish identity which has renounced its Jewish origins in order to give precedence to being German. In a talk with Felix Rosengarten, Rabbi Gottschalk’s tone becomes prophetic. Confronted with the Rosengarten’s rationality and conviction of living in a time when the Jewish-German dialogue had reached its final phase, Gottschalk responds in a tone of reproach and threatening prophecy:

Es ist etwas Seltsames um Euch deutsche Juden. Wenn ihr klug seid, seid ihr klüger, wenn ihr kultiviert seid, seid ihr kultivierter, und wenn ihr menschlich seid, seid ihr menschlicher als andere Men-

¹⁹² *Ivi*, p. 64.

¹⁹³ *Ivi*, p. 47.

¹⁹⁴ *Ivi*, pp. 33-34.

¹⁹⁵ *Ivi*, p. 35.



schen. Wehe Euch, wenn die anderen das eines Tages merken. [...] Einmal werden sie vor euch hintreten und sagen: Ihr seid schlechter, dümmer, miserabler als wir. Ihr seid Schädlinge des Volkes. Hinaus mit Euch. An den Galgen.¹⁹⁶

Various scenes in the play depict a Jewish-German bourgeoisie proud of professing itself “more German than the Germans”. In the play’s third scene, for example, the various characters, the entire Rosengarten family (with Edgar dressed like a Hussar) and their friends, take part in a parade in honor of Wilhelm II, who at the beginning of 1913 celebrated twenty-five years of his reign: on this occasion the reactionary and patriotic Bukofzer demonstrates his sense of belonging to a nation for which he would sacrifice his entire being. His model is Baron Bleichröder, who Sahl describes in his memoirs as a “Vorbild eines fast schon völlig assimilierten, deutsch denkenden und deutsch betenden jüdischen Patriziertums”,¹⁹⁷ a Jew who had become a nobleman with the sovereign’s help. Bukofzer’s and Felix Rosengarten’s patriotism will find its natural outlet in the eruption of the First World War, which for both of them represents their awaited trial by fire to show their belonging to the German people:

Es gibt Leute, und ihr kennt sie, die von uns behaupten, wir gehörten nicht dazu, wir wären nur dem Namen nach Deutsche. Dies ist der Augenblick, ihnen zu beweisen, daß wir zu ihnen gehören. Ich reiße mich nicht darum, Soldat zu werden, aber meine Kinder sollen wissen, daß ihr Vater sein Land im Augenblick der Gefahr nicht im Stich gelassen hat.¹⁹⁸

That the Jewish-German dialogue has failed is an argument that men like Bukofzer prefer not to confront. Dogged by questions from the man who knows he will be deported and fall victim to the Holocaust, Bukofzer exculpates, for the umpteenth time, the German peo-

¹⁹⁶ *Ivi*, pp. 63-64.

¹⁹⁷ Hans Sahl, *Memoiren eines Moralisten*, cit., p. 16.

¹⁹⁸ Hans Sahl, *Hausmusik*, cit., p. 112.



ple and places the blame on the Jewish intelligentsia that sympathizes with Communism: “Leute wie Ihnen haben wir es zu verdanken, dass dem deutschen Volk schließlich die Geduld ausging und dass man uns alle in den selben Topf warf, ohne einen Unterschied zu machen”.¹⁹⁹

Bukofzer’s inadequate political foresight, and his contempt for left-wing Jews, finds its sounding board in the play *Rubinstein*, set in a decisive historical moment for the Jews’ emancipation: that of German national unity. The author insists not only on the bonds of Wagnerian anti-Semitism, chosen as an *exemplum* of German anti-Semitism, but on the uninformed predisposition of a certain kind of Judaism (that incarnated by the figure of the mentally unbalanced Rubinstein) toward a certain *Selbstausslöschung* just so as to become more German. A concept, *Selbstausslöschung*, which represents, as Spies effectively observes, “Sahls paradoxe Variante der These vom jüdischen Selbsthass”.²⁰⁰

Among the audio cassettes Sahl used to record works and thoughts as he slowly lost his eyesight, there are some he also used to record his thoughts on the case of Rubinstein and Wagner, probably when he was still collecting documentary material on the argument and had not yet decided on the form to give to his project. The tape, as he confesses in his memoirs,²⁰¹ was erased on account of his being distracted, therefore he later decided to reconstruct how much he had recorded from memory, deciding not to write a novel, but a play. The original project, according to his memoirs, already contained all of the elements that later merged together in the play:

In meiner Tonbandsammlung befindet sich eine Schachtel, auf der mit Rotstift “Richard Wagner” geschrieben steht, Materialien für ein neues Buch oder eine dramatische Darstellung eines ungeheuerlichen Themas, das sich damit verbindet, nämlich die Selbstausslöschung eines deutschen Judentums, das in Richard Wagner seinen Erlöser zu sehen glaubte [...] der zu seiner Vernichtung aufrief.²⁰²

¹⁹⁹ *Ivi*, p. 28.

²⁰⁰ Bernhard Spies, *op. cit.*, p. 427.

²⁰¹ Hans Sahl, *Memoiren eines Moralisten*, cit., p. 44.

²⁰² *Ivi*, p. 40.



The archival material shows Sahl's tireless work on the Wagner-Rubinstein case. An entire file contains newspaper articles and critical essays dating from 1981, the year he most likely began to dedicate himself to the project. Thanks to the diversity of the collected materials one realizes that Sahl had oriented his research according to three themes: Wagner's anti-Semitism; the figure of the pianist Rubinstein; and the debate on the composer's anti-Semitism, especially through the theses put forth by Hartmut Zelinsky and Martin Gregor Dellin²⁰³ – with whom the author was in epistolary contact²⁰⁴ – and the impassioned argument which erupted between the two scholars in the summer of 1982 following the controversial staging of *Parsifal* at the Bayreuther *Festspiele* of that year.²⁰⁵ The project's long gestation period also influenced the play's formal aspect in the form of a second title, *Ein Stück über die Arbeit an einem Stück*, which announced the collage of documents and materials of which the work is made up: "Dies ist ein Stück über die Arbeit an einem Stück. Es besteht aus verschiedenen Elementen: aus den Bemerkungen des Autors über sein Stück, aus Szenen, Dokumenten, Kommentaren, aus der Musik Richard Wagners im Hintergrund".²⁰⁶

The theatrical composition mirrors the aim of a documentary play. An author is looking through the manuscript of the piece upon which he is working. That piece has to do with a work on Wagner and

²⁰³ Cfr. DLA-Marbach, A:Sahl/Dramatisches/Rubinstein/Materialien, darunter Briefe/Mappe1. The file contains photocopies of numerous articles by Zelinsky, an essay by M. G. Dellin, a copy of the articles concerning Rubinstein's death from the "Luzerner Tageblatt" of 1884; a copy of some of Wagner's letters.

²⁰⁴ Cfr. DLA-Marbach, A:Sahl/Dramatisches/Rubinstein/Materialien, darunter Briefe/Mappe2. The file contains letters from Sahl to M.G. Dellin (1981), to the *Israel Kulturgemeinde* of Bayreuth (1981), to Manfred Eger at the *Richard-Wagner-Nationalarchiv* of Bayreuth (1982), to the hotel *AuLac* in Lucern, where Rubinstein had committed suicide a century before (1982), a letter to the *Richard Wagner-Museum* of Bayreuth (1986), and a letter from Zelinsky to Sahl (1981).

²⁰⁵ Cfr. The interview with "Der Spiegel" by Hartmut Zelinsky: „Zu schönen Klängen eine brutale Ideologie“. *Wagner Forscher Hartmut Zelinsky über „Parsifal“ und dessen Auswirkungen auf Hitler und Holocaust*, in "Der Spiegel", 19 July 1982, pp. 132-138.

²⁰⁶ Quotations from the text come from the typescript held in Marbach and are not followed by page numbers. Cfr. DLA-Marbach, A:Sahl/Dramatisches/Rubinstein/Typoskript.



on the Jewish pianist Joseph Rubinstein's collaboration on *Parsifal*; however, the author never manages to finish, and, as such, presents the public with the material of his text in a problematic form:

Ich wollte immer ein Stück über einen gewissen Joseph Rubinstein schreiben, der gemeinsam mit Richard Wagner an dessen Parsifal arbeitete und den Klavierauszug herstellte. Ich habe bereits einige Szenen skizziert, die ich Ihnen vorlesen möchte.²⁰⁷

The author's reading of the extracts of his manuscript almost exclusively involves the documentary material useful to the assembly of the scenes: the letter with which Rubinstein presented himself to Wagner, the letters of Richard and Cosima Wagner, and above all Wagner's essay *Das Judentum in der Musik* (1869). The quotations the author has chosen, all functional to proving the composer's anti-Semitism, are from time to time accompanied by comments, dialogues with the public, and above all by the various scenes of the drama in *stricto sensu* where his voice is eclipsed in order to allow the various characters to translate the documents' content into action. This is the way the Ukrainian Rubinstein's drama takes shape, the pianist who, "schon vor seinem Zusammentreffen mit Wagner pathologisch vorbelastet war",²⁰⁸ from distant Charkov turned to Wagner in 1872 as a last hope of salvation from the suicidal instinct that held him in its grip and from the inevitable extinction of Judaism he felt was to come:

Geehrter Herr, ich bin ein Jude. Hiermit ist für Sie alles gesagt. [...] Mein Zustand wird immer schlimmer, denn ich erkenne, daß die Juden untergehen müssen; wie sollte ich aber nicht untergehen, da ich selbst Jude bin? Durch die Taufe kann ich nicht untergehen. Mir blieb nur der Tod. Schon habe ich versucht, ihn mir zu geben: aber noch beschloß ich, Ihnen zu schreiben. Sie können mir vielleicht noch helfen.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁸ Hans Sahl, *Memoiren eines Moralisten*, cit., p. 41.

²⁰⁹ DLA-Marbach, A:Sahl/Dramatisches/Rubinstein/Typoskript.



Rubinstein's letter is an authentic document demonstrating the author's thesis as well as his interest in the figure of the Ukrainian pianist: "Rubinstein sah in Wagner den Erlöser von einem Judentum, dem er bereits abtrünnig geworden war. Das ist die furchtbare Wahrheit, die ich in der Geschichte sah, der Ermordete lieferte sich selbst seinem Mörder aus".²¹⁰ His character, in other words, becomes emblematic of Judaism's tendency to the aforementioned *Selbstausslöschung*. Wagner's immediate acceptance of Rubinstein to work on his own *Parsifal* – welcoming him with the words "Kommen Sie nach Bayreuth. Ich brauche Sie!" – explains the composer's contorted psychology ("Wagner nutzte die Juden aus und sagte ihnen zugleich, wie nutzlos sie seien"),²¹¹ which will emerge in the scenes in which he works with the pianist and the orchestra director Hermann Levi. Wagner's anti-Semitism is represented by the author's intrusion when he comments on extracts from *Das Judentum in der Musik* and from letters, staging a sort of conversation-inquisition in the scenes that see Wagner talking with his Jewish collaborators. The exchange of quips with Rubinstein exemplifies a Jewish-German dialogue brought to its extreme consequences. Wagner, who in the Jews saw "ein Fremdkörper",²¹² blames them for having a corruptive influence on German culture, which was still in a phase of development:

Wagner: Ihr seid zu früh in die deutsche Kultur eingedrungen. Wir waren noch nicht fertig mit uns selber.

Rubinstein: Ihr habt auf uns gewartet, wir sind gekommen, um euch zu vollenden. Wir haben euch geliebt, bewundert, verehrt, wir haben Bücher über euch geschrieben, Kantaten, und ihr habt uns verachtet, verhöhnt, getreten. Wir haben euch gezeigt, wie groß ihr seid, wir sind die Trabanten eurer Kultur.

Wagner: Ja, die Würmer, die uns zerfressen wollen, unsere Kultur.²¹³

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

²¹² DLA-Marbach, A:Sahl/Dramatisches/Rubinstein/Typoskript.

²¹³ *Ibid.*



Collaborating with Wagner will prove to be fatal for the weak Rubinstein:

Ich stimme Ihnen zu, es gibt keine Alternative mehr, ich stelle mich dem Untergang zur Verfügung, wir sind am Ende unserer Geschichte angelangt. Wir geben das Zeichen der Erleuchtung an euch weiter.²¹⁴

Rubinstein and Hermann Levi's grueling work on *Parsifal*, exacerbated by the insults of a capricious and cruel genius who never misses an occasion to hold long exhortations against their origins, ends up alienating the pianist. If in the beginning the hope of a possible Jewish-German dialogue was still recognizable in Rubinstein's responses to Wagner, by the final scenes one sees him ever more taken by a dark, self-destructive obsession. He determinedly tries to persuade the more rational Hermann Levi, treated no less harshly by the composer, that the "Wagner ist die Antwort", the answer to that flight from Judaism and from himself which in his vision he will only be able to find in *Selbstausslöschung*:

Rubinstein: Er braucht uns, wir brauchen ihn. Wagner ist die Antwort. Unsere Flucht ist zu Ende. Die Flucht vor uns selber. Ein historischer Augenblick.

Levi: Gut. Und warum braucht er uns?

Rubinstein: Wir verkünden ihn. Seine Heldengestalten sind unsere Schutzheiligen geworden. Ein winziges, über die ganze Erde verstreutes Volk identifiziert sich mit einem mystischen Imperium von ungeahnter Größe. Unsere Selbstausslöschung vollzieht sich in einem Festakt von gewaltiger Wortverschwendung und musikalischem Überschwang. Hojotoho -, Hojotoho -. Wir dienen einer großen Sache, Hermann Levi...wir müssen die Konsequenzen tragen.²¹⁵

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*



Rubinstein's destiny concludes with his suicide after the composer's death. It would be reductive to see only a victim of Wagner's anti-Semitism in the figure of the pianist or to recognize in his suicide a "Präfiguratio des Massenmords an den Juden".²¹⁶ Rubinstein's tragedy is first of all individual. His profound laceration, even if exacerbated by his work with Wagner, was born long before his encounter with the composer and is based on a hatred for his very own origins. The Jewish being for Rubinstein is a fatal stigma from which it is impossible to remove oneself: circumcision is in his eyes an indelible stain, a damnation that keeps him from being able to establish any relationship at all: "Ich schäme mich meiner Nacktheit", he confesses to Levi, "unsere Väter haben uns wie Vieh gebranntmarkt, sie haben uns mit einem Zeichen versehen, an dem jeder sofort erkennen kann, aus welchem Stall wir gekommen sind".²¹⁷ Wagnerian anti-Semitism thus becomes a solution to his personal discord:

Rubinstein: (sieht in den Spiegel) Sieh mich an! Wer bin ich? Ich bin von Luther und Bach geprägt worden, nicht von der Haggada. Ich habe in Wien Musik studiert. Ich spreche deutsch. Ich denke deutsch. Ich habe mir Fragen gestellt. Wagner war die Antwort. Die Antwort auf meine Zerrissenheit. Ich hasse den Juden in mir. Wenn ich in den Spiegel sehe, hasse ich die Nase, das schwarze Haar. Ich will blond sein, blond wie ein Schwede.²¹⁸

Rubinstein, in other words, hates the Jews no less than he does Wagner. His anti-Semitism, however, is the result of a blind and embittered love for German culture, a love that is reciprocated by Wagner's contempt. In that sense, the play *Rubinstein* effectively depicts, in line with the author's intentions, "die Tragödie einer deutsch-jüdischen Vereinigung, die zu den großen Leistungen des Abendlandes gehörten und in den Vernichtungslagern endete".

²¹⁶ Bernhard Spies, *op. cit.*, p. 422.

²¹⁷ DLA-Marbach, A:Sahl/Dramatisches/Rubinstein/Typoskript.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*



Conclusion

Up until now we have attempted to offer, on the one hand, an examination of the author's unpublished work and the state of the archives related to him; and, on the other, an investigation of the various suggestions through the *leitmotiv* of intermedial commingling, which appealed not only to the writer of the *Hörspiele* and the *Filmmexposés*, but to the dramatist *stricto sensu*.

The fascination the lively debate on German theatre in the 1920s produced in Sahl is documented by numerous reviews the author himself penned as a theatre critic before his flight from Germany. From his review of Zuckmayer's *Das fröhliche Weinberg*, which signalled his debut in 1925,²¹⁹ to the acute description of the staging of Schiller's *Räuber* edited by Piscator,²²⁰ the young journalist demonstrated having a careful eye to the stimulation of the theatre of his time, the theatre which, in his memory, continued to be the expression of the greatest German tradition, and which had been open to the exchange of ideas before being brutally interrupted by the advent of Nazism:

Selten zuvor hat das Theater eine so bedeutende Rolle im Bewußtsein der Menschen gespielt wie zur Zeit der Weimarer Republik. [...] Das Theater wurde wieder zum Weltanschauungs-Theater, zu einem Theater der Ideen, der geistigen Auseinandersetzung und besonders natürlich der Konfrontation.²²¹

In any event, it is no accident that the author turned to the dramatic form for his first work, the oratorio *Jemand*, capitalizing on the knowledge he had acquired as a critic. Resolute in his certainty that the theatre represented, first and foremost, an open forum for the exchange of ideas and an arm of political propaganda, Sahl dedicated himself to the theatre throughout the years of his exile as well.

²¹⁹ Cfr. Hans Sahl, "Das fröhliche Weinberg". *Im Theater am Schiffbauerdamm*, in "Und doch...", cit., pp. 43-44.

²²⁰ Cfr. Hans Sahl, *Erstaufführung im Staatstheater*, *ivi*, pp. 44-45.

²²¹ Hans Sahl, *Memoiren eines Moralisten*, cit., p. 121.



Not only do the pages of his memoirs demonstrate this – where we learn he frequented the Zürcher Schauspielhaus and Kurt Hirschfeld –, but his conviction that Erika Mann's *Pfeffermühle* and the *Chornicon* (with which he collaborated) were effective mediums in the struggle against Nazism²²² does as well.

Sahl's interest in the theatre did not wane at all during his years in New York, years in which he personally confronted the forms of American theatre, at times as a translator (Miller, Wilder etc.), at times as a cultural correspondent from New York for Swiss and German dailies. Indeed, the American theatre offered him many occasions for reflection, especially when compared with the European.²²³ In the end, the American theatre not only stimulated Sahl the critic, but Sahl the dramaturge as well who took inspiration from it especially in regards to the assembly of his later dramas (*Hausmusik* and *Rubinstein*), which are difficult to conceive of without the contribution of psychological theatre of Wilder and Miller.

²²² Cfr. Hans Sahl, *Das Exil im Exil*, cit., p. 40.

²²³ Cfr. Hans Sahl, *Theater in America*, in "Und doch...", cit., pp. 160-164.