



2017

## *Woe to those...* by Jakob van Hoddis and *mystery and crime and elderly couple* by Yaak Karsunke

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### Recommended Citation

Divers, Gregory (2017) "*Woe to those...* by Jakob van Hoddis and *mystery and crime and elderly couple* by Yaak Karsunke," *Transference*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 6.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/transference/vol5/iss1/6>

Gregory Divers  
Woe to those...

Jakob van Hoddis  
Weh denen...

Woe to those who await the night  
In the pale glow of twilight  
                                  – Evenings they say  
The goddess of life slinks smiling  
Through the streets in a sheer silk  
Moon-woven gown, red flowers  
In her white hand and if she meets  
You in dull dreary rooms where  
No lamp's sacrificial brightness  
Glow, she will sneer and go her way –  
Woe to those who await the night  
In pale twilight.

Gregory Divers  
mystery and crime

Yaak Karsunke  
mystery and crime

*for Rainer Hachfeld*

Samuel Dashiell Hammett “knew  
a man who once  
stole a Ferris wheel”  
(more than that he didn’t divulge)

yet: such a contraption doesn’t  
just walk off on its  
own (even if it’d been dismantled  
broken down to parts & pieces  
& stored in crates)

the gondolas alone  
added to that girders & struts  
plus nuts & bolts  
by the hundredweight

at the least one will need  
a flatbed trailer with the length as well as  
a tractor with the power to haul it all away  
(& from where to take  
if not to steal)

a lot of work – on the other hand:  
who’s going to steal a Ferris wheel?  
Hammett  
still knew someone who did

Gregory Divers  
elderly couple

*(after Sebald Beham)*

Yaak Karsunke  
älteres paar

*für Ingrid*

there on a palm-of-the-hand-sized  
copper engraving from 1543  
you see them standing  
a woman & a man  
not exactly slender no longer young  
the inventors of love

that rustling sound of fig tree leaves  
rubbing against each other  
kept Eve from her sleep  
& as Adam took the apple he saw  
her breasts with new  
eyes above his slowly  
opening lips

(shortly thereafter both were  
deeply moved by knowledge)

the serpent slithers  
out of paradise & glides  
smoothly towards you & me –  
let us go then into the garden  
& adorn their altar  
with pomegranates

## Commentary

Jakob van Hoddis: *Weh denen... / Woe to those...*

Jakob van Hoddis was born in Berlin in 1887 as Hans Davidsohn; his pen name van Hoddis is an anagram of the family name. Although primarily known as an early-expressionist German poet ranking alongside Georg Heym, Georg Trakl and Ernst Stadler, van Hoddis is also considered a forerunner of surrealism.

Jakob van Hoddis was deported to Poland in 1942 and murdered by the Nazis, most likely in Sobibór. Unfortunately he published relatively little during his lifetime; “Weh denen...” is one of his many poems first published long after he was dead.

“Weh denen...” is somewhat unique among the works of Jakob van Hoddis. Unlike the majority of his poems “Weh denen...” has neither formal stanza structure nor rhyme scheme. The content, however, is representative of his verse. Like many of his generation, van Hoddis followed in the Romantic tradition of appropriating legends and mythological figures for his subject matter. Here we have an unnamed goddess of life. Whether this is the Egyptian, Greek or another deity is not specified; nevertheless, this goddess readily finds a home in the unique poetic world of Jakob van Hoddis. The setting is at twilight, a special time for van Hoddis for it marks the passage from day to night. His goddess of life is endowed with distinctive qualities both in her attire and mannerisms, particularly in how she “slinks” through the streets and sneers at those she encounters in “dull dreary rooms” during twilight time. Although this goddess of life appears as ephemeral as twilight itself, there is something overtly ominous in how the text is bracketed by the initial two and final two lines. The repetition of “Woe to those who await the night” coupled with the actions of this goddess of life suggests that the wait is in vain.

Yaak Karsunke: *mystery and crime*

Although Yaak Karsunke began as a political poet during the 1960s, his poetry includes a wide variety of subject matter. He

has long been fascinated by crime novels and is the author of *Toter Mann* (1989) for which he received the *Deutscher Krimi Preis* in 1990. His poem “mystery and crime” pays tribute to an American master of the crime novel and is dedicated to Karsunke’s friend Rainer Hachfeld, a jazz saxophonist. The poem is rendered in Karsunke’s distinctive style and orthography: only proper nouns are capitalized, the language is unadorned, the diction concise. The quote in stanza one is Note # 28 in Hammett’s “From the Memoirs of a Private Detective” (*The Smart Set*, March 1923). The key to translating Yaak Karsunke’s poetry is capturing the voice (especially with regard to how he uses flavoring particles such as *ja* and *eben*); and here that means somehow blending in the voice and diction of Dashiell Hammett lurking in the background. Furthermore, Karsunke’s deft use of the German language and occasional word play are not easily rendered in English. For example, in stanza four I chose the more lengthy but parallel construction of “a flatbed trailer with the length” paired with “a tractor with the power” to emphasize the crucial point expressed in the original. Finally, the vocabulary in this poem is somewhat dated. The best example of this is “by the hundredweight” in stanza three, a phrase typical of Dashiell Hammett’s 1920s.

Yaak Karsunke: *älteres paar* / *elderly couple*

Yaak Karsunke’s “älteres paar” is based on a copper engraving by the 16th century German artist Hans Sebald Beham. The poetic treatment of an artist and work of art has been a constant in the poetry of Yaak Karsunke ever since the 1960s. Once again, this poem is representative of his distinctive style and orthography with only proper nouns being capitalized and his preference for the ampersand. The language is succinct with no word wasted. The German in “älteres paar” was relatively easy to render in English; the challenge in translating this poem was not only to capture the voice but also to make sure that line breaks enhanced both content and diction. One advantage I have in translating Yaak Karsunke is that we have known each other for over twenty years and communicate freely regarding my translations. Both he and his wife Ingrid, to whom this poem is dedicated, have a good feel for the English language and that

greatly aids this partnership. Yaak Karsunke calls “älteres paar” one of his personal favorite poems (a vintage print of the copper engraving hangs on the wall above his desk) and is also a double portrait of him and his wife. As a closing note, those readers familiar with T. S. Eliot’s “Prufrock” will recognize the “let us go then” in the final stanza.

Source texts:

Hoddis, Jakob van. “Weh denen...,” *Dichtungen und Briefe*, edited by Regina Nörtemann, Arche, 1987, p. 147.

—. “Mystery and Crime.” Previously unpublished.

Karsunke, Yaak. “älteres paar.” *hand & fuß: Gedichte*, Lyrikedition 2000, 2004, p. 58.