



12-14-2017

Gina, Steamers on the Havel, I made my landing on an island where..., and Both day and evening now began to seep by Georg Heym

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Recommended Citation

Ruleman, William A. III (2017) "*Gina, Steamers on the Havel, I made my landing on an island where..., and Both day and evening now began to seep* by Georg Heym," *Transference*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 11.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/transference/vol5/iss1/11>

William Ruleman
Gina

Georg Heym
Gina

All round you the scents of the spacious steppes still blow,
The air of Polish summers, the surge and shiver
Of the wheat fields, when, along the river,
Work gangs shoulder on, huge rafts in tow.

Deep as black autumnal wells that rise
Alone to pierce the early morning's grays,
Such are your eyes, which, with their distant gaze,
Shun narrow streets for starry winter skies.

And you were made to mount a steed wild and free,
Meant for a ride some night when dangers flare,
Your Tschapka shining with gilt finery

While underneath it flows your fine black hair
And bright as silver gleams our weaponry
When the white eagle sails the moonlit air.

William Ruleman
Steamers on the Havel

Georg Heym
Die Dampfer auf der Havel

Wannsee

White bodies of the steamers. Keels that rend
The lakes in widespread furrows red as blood.
A massive sunset. On its rays' bright flood
Quivers music borne here from the wind.

And now the ships' flanks feel the near shorelands
That nudge them on past dark and arching bowers.
The chestnuts shake down all their soft white flowers
Like silver rain on children's waiting hands.

And farther out again. Where twilight lays
Its black wreath round an island wood that lies
Near soft waves striking at a reed bed's maze.

In the west's abyss, as chill as moonlight rise
Smoke columns still, while in a weary daze
The dead process on through pale evening skies.

William Ruleman
I made my landing
on an island where . . .

Georg Heym
Auf einer insel
landete ich . . .

I made my landing on an island where
The summer held its frail and final stand
In autumn's rich domain. And, settling there,
My heart had won at last that magic land
That it had dreamed of on soft nights in spring.

There it found love. And the beech wood's autumn gold
Was the house of love for a host of lovely days.
Yet autumn all too soon would trace with bold,
Triumphant sway the last, secluded ways
Of vanquished summer's quiet lingering.

The summer fled. And conquering autumn came
And broke with coarse, crude hand and storms' rude power
The summer's final refuge. Its every flame
Consumed the forest and shattered the beeches' tower,
Erstwhile dwelling of love and majesty.

The love then died. Once more the boat that bore
Me in the storms and in the dark flood's flow
Comes near to bear me off. Our island's shore
Is soaked in sunset now. But soon its glow
Is gone, and I am lonely on life's sea.

William Ruleman
Both *day and evening*
now *began to seep . . .*

Georg Heym
Da sank *der abend*
und der tag . . .

Both day and evening now began to seep
Down through the island's thin and brittle brake.
The sound of ice now faded on the lake,
And all but the wind in the dry reeds slipped toward sleep.

Shades still passed across the crimson blaze,
Racing fast till they, too, disappeared.
The winter land lay mute, alone, and bleared
As twilight cloaked the whole expanse with grays.

You turned around. Before you stood the sight
Of forests already dark. And night quite soon
Came to the icy sky. From the wood, the moon
Now made its way. The cove all round grew bright.

And near and far now blended in one field,
One wall or scene of equal radiance.
The moon's path spanned the ice's wide expanse
With muted gleam, as on an ancient shield.

Commentary

The German Expressionist poet Georg Heym (1887–1912) is most famous for his surreal depictions of the modern city and nightmarish visions of a culture in collapse. While he did not live to see the First World War, scholars tend to agree that his strangest verse foreshadows its horrors.

Heym spent his childhood in Lower Silesia (now Southern Poland). Then, in his thirteenth year, his family moved to Berlin, the city with which he is linked most; and while his more sensational pieces are often inspired by that noisy metropolis, there are a host of others—many of them unfamiliar to English readers—that are set in a more or less peaceful countryside. The poems that I have presented here are of that kind, and they show Heym's more traditional romantic tendencies, as well as his keen and sensitive observations of nature.

To begin with, "Gina" indeed is romantic. Heym raises his subject to the stratum of a warrior's status, imagining her on a raging steed and clad in the type of Polish helmet known as a *Tschapka*. In fact, Heym so ennobles Gina that her presence seems to suffuse the landscape with which he associates her. In this way, she almost attains an otherworldly quality; and it seems fitting that, in my use of "shiver" and "river," I found myself echoing Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott," an earlier poem about a supernatural female.

"Steamers on the Havel," the river where Heym died by drowning in January of 1912, conveys no premonition of his early death, though it does end with an image of the dead processing into the night. Moreover, its air of acceptance, tranquility, and self-effacement—like that of the English Romantic Keats, say, at the end of "To Autumn"—confirms the view that Heym (even more so than that earlier poet) was "half in love with easeful Death."

With its transition from late summer to autumn, "I Made My Landing on an Island Where . . ." also hints of Keats's poem, though the suggestion of a love that has ended and left the speaker "lonely on life's sea"—hence solitary in a turbulent realm removed from the island's ephemeral haven—makes for an ending that is more disquieting. And, if the boat that comes

to bear him off reminds one of Charon's craft on the Styx in Hades (a river that figures in another poem by Heym), the implication is that life in the ordinary human world is hell—an idea supported by the fact of the young dreamer's disdain for any mundane career.

Finally, the last poem here also contains echoes. Reminded of Georg Trakl's "Dämmerung" ("Twilight"), I deliberately changed "shadows" to "shades" in line five. My use of "bleared" in line seven was less intentional; but on adopting it, I thought right away of a line in Thomas Hardy's "The Convergence of the Twain" (1912), which was based on the sinking of the *Titanic*. Then I recalled that Heym drowned roughly three months before the *Titanic* sank, and this last piece began to seem incredibly (and eerily) prophetic.

Source texts:

Heym, Georg. "Auf einer Insel landete ich ..." http://gedichte.xbib.de/Heym_gedicht_Auf+einer+Insel+landete+ich....htm.

—. "Da Sank der Abend und der Tag ..." http://gedichte.xbib.de/Heym_gedicht_Da+sank+der+Abend+und+der+Tag....htm.

—. "Die Dampfer auf der Havel." *Gesammelte Gedichte*, edited by Carl Seelig, Verlag der Arche, 1947, p. 168.

—. "Gina." *Gesammelte Gedichte*, edited by Carl Seelig, Verlag der Arche, 1947, p. 176.