

Fritz Senn's Poems *Der Brief* and *Der sterbende Ilya Repin*

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I

The German sculptor Ernst Barlach (1870–1938) and the Russian painter Ilya Repin (1844–1930) are famous artists to be commemorated each in two separate poems by Fritz Senn.¹ This paper offers a critical reading of Senn's two Repin poems — one linked to a famous painting by him, the other to his death.

II

Der Brief

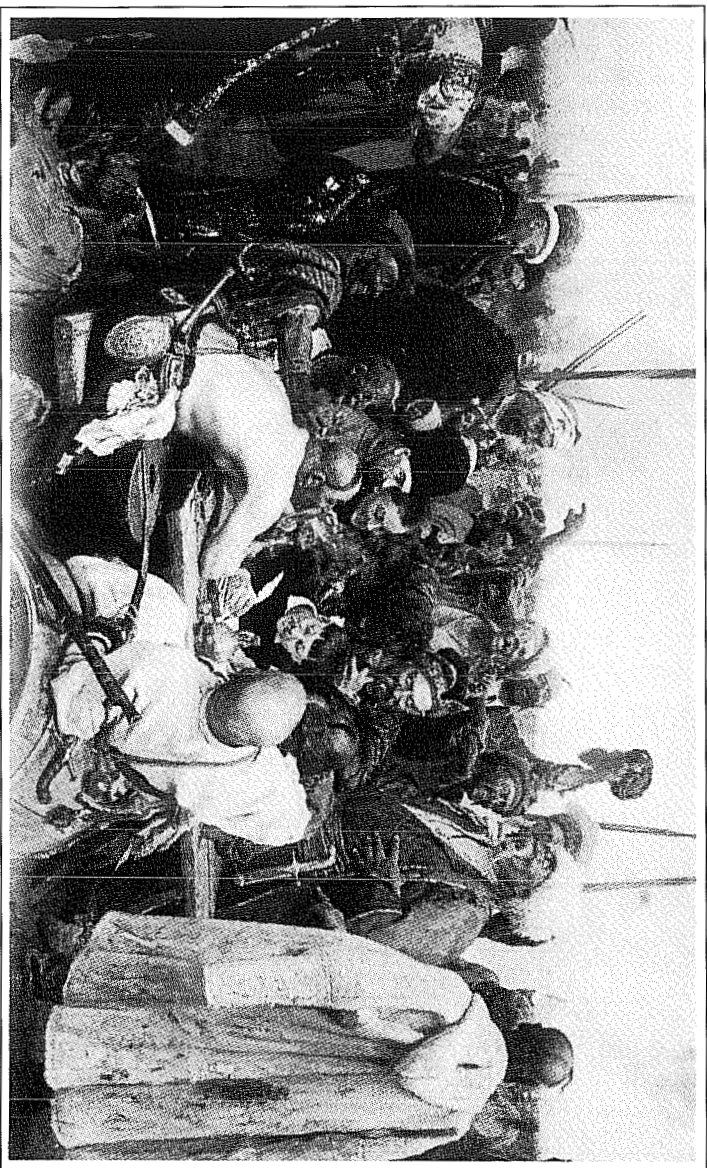
(Zum Bilde Repins:
Der Brief der Saporosher Kosaken an den Sultan)

- Einer schreibt — des Lesens kundig,
Eine grobe Russenposse,
Stark gewürzt und ohne Glosse.
Grimmig neigt ein grauer Fechter
5 Sich zum Ohr des Schreibers hin,
Mit unbändigem Gelächter
Rührt er an der Schulter ihn.
Spott quillt aus dem Federkiel;
Buchstabierend schreibt Kiril:
10 "Sultan! Unsre tapfern Männer
Kennen schon euch Kopfabtrenner —
Morgen geht's zum Waffentanze,
Ihr den Säbel, wir die Lanze.
Sultan! Lass den Harem offen

- 15 Und entschleire deine Zofen,
 Weil wir im Vorüberschweifen
 Deine jungen Stütlein greifen;
 Fluchend werden die Eunuchen
 Deine Stutenherde suchen,
 20 Denn wir führen sie zum Bade
 Irgendwo ans Seegestade...
 Stuten mit den breiten Hüften,
 Werden noch nach Salben düften,
 Nicht mehr lange, balde werden
 25 Duften sie nach Rinderherden.
 So wie wir — wir Steppenfalken,
 Die das Fell euch morgen walken;
 Haremsweiber sind es heute,
 Morgen sind's Kosakenbräute,
 30 Die zum Zeitvertreib wir brauchen,
 Wenn die Dörfer ringsum rauchen ...
 Morgen brennt dein Liebestempel,
 Und der Buhlerinnen Krempel
 Ist der Saporosher Beute
 35 Für die Weiber, für die Bräute,
 Nach verwegendem Waffentanze ...
 Ihr den Säbel — wir die Lanze ...

 Durch die abendschwülen Matten
 Zieht der Deft vom Hammelbraten.
 40 An den Fluren schmoren, backen
 Saporosher, Donkosaken;
 Pferde weiden, Grillen geigen
 Und die ersten Sterne steigen,
 Durch das müde Abenddunkel
 45 Lagerfeuer, Lichtgefunkel:
 Da ein Chor, die sehnsuchtsvollen
 Mythen alter Zeiten rollen,
 Rauschen dumpf wie Meereswogen
 Durch die Steppe, langgezogen ...
 50 Wie der Wind von Adlerschwingen,
 Schwingen, die den Raum bezwingen ...²

Based explicitly on Repin's painting "The Zaporozhie [Cossacks] Writing a Reply to the Turkish Sultan," the above poem was first published 1951 in the Winnipeg journal *Die Mennonitische Welt*. Three clearly differentiated sections constitute *Der Brief*: a short sketch of the painting's central Cossack group (ll. 1-9), the presumed content of their letter to the Sultan (ll. 10-37), and a lyrical description of their camp after nightfall (ll. 38-51).



The Zaporozhie [Cossacks] writing a reply to the Turkish Sultan. Original in the State Russian Museum of Leningrad.

Irony pervades the first section. The man subsequently identified as the Cossacks' scribe is first said to be capable of reading. What may strike the reader as a redundancy (in order to write, one must obviously know how to read) is actually based on a simple fact. Among an illiterate majority, even semi-literate people who cannot write but can read³ are highly prized. That this scribe named Kiril (undoubtedly in honour of the originator of the Russian alphabet) spells aloud what he is writing (l. 9) indicates a less than learned penman. This lack of sophistication is complemented by the introduction of the letter as a crude Russian farce (l. 2). "Stark gewürzt" (l. 3) suggests that its erotic spiciness is none too subtle, and "ohne Glosse" here means without prevarication.⁴ While the posture of the seasoned warrior leaves it open whether he is dictating any of the words, his expression — maliciousness⁵ combined with unrestrained and roaring laughter — sets the tone for the following section.

Omitting any of the Byzantine sycophancy and the plethora of titles with which the ruler of the Ottoman Empire would customarily be addressed, this letter is a deliberate affront from the very start. Casually it conveys the Cossacks' certainty of their victory over the Sultan on the next day, and takes for granted that his harem will be part of their spoils. To a large extent, the Cossacks' letter consists of an extended erotic fantasy that is hardly mitigated by the main metaphor (odalisques as fillies).⁶ It clashes with two others (Cossacks as falcons, l. 26; Turks as furry animals, l. 27), thus manifesting the farcical crudeness announced earlier. The term *Buhlerinnen* (l. 33) leaves no doubt that the *Haremsweiber* (l. 28), tomorrow's *Kosakenbräute* (l. 29), are regarded as harlots. This letter shows the Cossacks to be motivated by a love of war for the sake of rapine and rape.

In contrast to the irony, impudence, and aggressive frivolity of the previous parts, the last section presents an idyllic picture of the Cossacks' camp at night. Against the background of roasting mutton, grazing horses, chirping crickets, campfires, and starlight, the Cossacks' ancient songs seem to transcend time and space. Not the violence of war but the combined power of myth and music, akin to natural forces like ocean waves (l. 48) and eagles' wings (l. 50), is the true conqueror of the steppe.⁷

Formally, the poem features trochaic tetrameter lines in rhymed couplets (except in ll. 1, 4 and 6; 5 and 7) for the ironic-objective introduction, the satiric-subjective central *Rollengedicht*, as well as the concluding loco-descriptive lyric. Such prosody places the poem in the anacreontic tradition of German literature, combining epicurean and erotic themes with stereotypical names and idealized landscapes. Senn must have been reminded of this form in his close reading of Josef Weinheber's volume *Hier ist das Wort*,⁸ where the poem *Trochäus* defines and exemplifies the conventional use of trochaic tetrameter:

Mir befiehlt ein rasches Wesen.
Wie ein Sprung bin ich zur Stelle;
schnelle mich von schwanker Stelle
in den Ring und führe den.⁹

In Weinheber's intentionally oblique use of poetic language,¹⁰ *Ring* may refer to a gathering of warriors as well as a group of singers or dancers.¹¹ "Weibsein ist's, wovon ich zehre,"¹² Weinheber lets the personified meter conclude about itself, characterizing not only its amatory associations but also its German tendency to result in feminine rhymes — which in Senn's poem prevail with just two exceptions (ll. 5 and 7; 8 and 9).

When we look for the pictorial prototype of Senn's poem *Der Brief*, we find that there are actually three well-known versions of Repin's Cossack painting, of which the respective originals (all with identical titles) are owned by the State Russian Museum of Leningrad, the State Tretyakov Gallery of Moscow, and the National Museum of Kharkov. These variants are the result of Repin's preoccupation with the subject for more than twelve years after, in 1878, he came upon the content of a letter allegedly written some 200 years earlier by the Zaporozhie Cossacks to Sultan Mohammed IV. Its instant appeal to Repin was undoubtedly intensified by the surge of Russian patriotism during the war against Turkey (1877–78), when even his friend Tolstoi temporarily set aside his philosophy of non-resistance to evil. After an initial sketch of the circular composition common to all three versions, Repin's further research on the subject necessitated extensive field trips in the 1880s to the former Zaporozhie Sech near Alexandrovsk (since 1921 Zaporozhye), the Caucasus, and even Turkey in order to collect authentic details about the Cossacks dispersed by Russian rulers in the 18th century. Finished in 1891, the Leningrad version was purchased by Czar Alexander III for 35,000 rubles, the largest single sum ever paid to an artist in Russia.¹³

Central in all three versions is a puny, faun-eared scribe, seated at a crude table and writing the letter with a quill. He is surrounded by two dozen martial-looking Cossacks in various poses and with heterogeneous colourful accoutrements including headgear and weapons. Each Cossack, including the scribe, has a unique facial expression and individual gesture mirroring amused reactions as the letter is being written. The total impression is one of animation and hilarious sound, which together with an abundance of brilliant reds with greens and yellows results in a lively "symphony of laughter."¹⁴ It is mainly in the depiction of certain Cossacks and of the fairly remote background that Repin's three executions differ. Whereas the Moscow version includes distant ships on a body of water (presumably the Dnieper river), the one in Kharkov features glimpses of the Cossacks' camp, and the Leningrad version has a hazy horizon that could indicate water or campfires.

From Senn's *Der Brief* it is unclear which of the three paintings the poem refers to. There are, in fact, reasons for concluding that he relied on less than accurate recall rather than on an actual picture before him. In the first place, Senn characterizes only one Cossack, other than the scribe, in an attitude (l. 7) not depicted by Repin. Furthermore, the evening setting of *Der Brief* (ll. 38 ff.) does not correspond to Repin's evident choice of daylight in all three

versions. And, most important, the middle section of Senn's poem differs completely from the Cossacks' letter that prompted Repin's choice of the subject.

The Zaporozhie Cossacks were named after their territory south of the Dnieper rapids (*porogi*), where they lived since the 14th century as warriors and pirating fishermen between the rivers Bug and Miuss, entering into fluctuating alliances with the neighbouring Poles, Turks, Tartars, and Russians in order to preserve their political independence. Of crucial importance was their principal stronghold (Sech) on the Dnieper island of Khortitsa, the setting of an apocryphal account based on the Turkish incursions into this region between 1676 and 1681. Cossack folklore has transmitted several versions of this story, in which the context and the date of the Cossacks' letter vary.¹⁵ Whether it came as a reply to the Sultan's demand for immediate surrender, or as an indignant reaction to his flagrant violation of a peace treaty, the pseudo-historical letter's text is identical in all recorded versions:

Thou Turkish Devil:

Brother and Companion of Lucifer himself! Who dares call himself Lord of the Christians — but is not! Babilonish cook! Brewer of Jerusalem! Goat-keeper of the herds of Alexandria! Swineherd of Great and Lesser Egypt! Armenian Sow and Tartar Goat! Insolent Unbeliever! May the Devil take you. The Cossacks refuse every demand and petition that you now make to them — or that you may in future invent.

Thank us for condescending to answer you!

(Signed) Ivan Sirko

and the Cossack Troops¹⁶

It is unlikely that Senn would have invented his own version of the letter if he had been fully informed about Repin's Cossack painting and its folklore roots. Like other Russian Mennonites,¹⁷ Senn probably was casually acquainted with it and undoubtedly even felt a special affinity for it, because in 1789 the former Khortitsa Sech became the nucleus of the first Mennonite settlement in Russia (*Altcolonie*), after the unruly Cossacks had been expelled by the government in 1775.¹⁸ The following analysis of Senn's second Repin poem will substantiate that at least until 1965 Senn was less than accurately informed about the artist and his works.

III

Der sterbende Ilja Repin (1930 verhungert in Finnland)

Die letzte Leinwand ist gespannt,
Bald sinkt der Pinsel aus der Hand,
Der Hunger herrscht, und Städtebrand.
Ich, einsam flüchtig, hier verbannt,

- 5 Bau mir aus Traum ein Heimatland.
 Wie lange noch? Der Abend fällt,
 Dem Pfuhl entsteigt die Unterwelt.
 Das flucht und lästert, hurt und zecht,
 Sengende Meute, Raubtiergeschlecht,
 10 Gesang, Geschrei, Rauchnebel schwebt,
 Als ob Iwan der Vierte wieder lebt!
 Mir ist der Wald, die Stille lieb,
 Ich hasse lauten Marktbetrieb.
 In meiner reichen Armut bin
 15 Ein Kind ich, fromm mit Kindersinn,
 Und sehne mich von früh bis spät
 Nach einem Menschen, der versteht. --
 Fremde ist Leid, der Ruhm ist Trug,
 Allüberall der Kain, der den Abel schlug.
 20 Im Osten ist der Himmel angelobt --
 Brennen dort Dörfer? Oder ist es Morgenrot? --¹⁹

A *Rollengedicht* like the second section of *Der Brief*, the preceding poem imagines Repin's last thoughts as he is dying of starvation in the solitude of his Finnish exile. The painter's gloomy monologue consists of a sustained contrast between himself and the world around him. His self-characterization (l. 13) is reminiscent of Horace's famous ode *Odi profanum vulgus*, but his piety (l. 15) is quite unlike the Roman poet's eclectic epicureanism. Direct and oblique Biblical allusions²⁰ reinforce Repin's pessimistic outlook. One of them is the word *Pfuhl* (l. 7), which in Luther's translation of Revelation renders the burning lake into which the Antichrist and his prophet will be hurled.²¹ In the words attributed by Senn to Repin, however, the dynamics are reversed: the creatures from the underworld have come to rule. Apocalypse is now. *Morgenrot* (l. 21) implies that *Abend* (l. 6) here has only a figurative meaning. The two questions with which the poem concludes are remarkably similar to these words of the First Norn in Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*:

Dämmt der Tag?
 Oder leuchtet die Lohe?²²

Like Wagner, Senn thus leaves it open whether apocalyptic doom marks an end or also a new beginning.

With the exception of three questions (ll. 6, 21), the poem consists of a series of assertions couched almost entirely in paratactic sentences. Exclusively male rhymes underline the dominant tone of apodictic finality. The choice of trochaic meter in mostly four-beat lines apparently contradicts what was stated above in conjunction with *Der Brief*. But again Senn could find a model in Weinheber, whose poem *Der Leichnam* expresses a Schopenhauerian contempt for temporal reality, in lines like

Es wird spät. Die Schatten reichen
 bis zur Stirn, die Frist ist klein.

Dieser Körper lebt zum Schein.
 Diese Wirklichkeit heisst Grauen.
 Diese Wesenheit heisst Nein.
 Bändige die Bettlerhände!
 Selbst das letzte ist nicht dein.
 Was auch kommt, es wird kein Ende,
 aber es wird tödlich sein.²³

How does Senn's poem about Repin's death compare with the facts? Actually Repin did not die of starvation, nor as an opponent to and a refugee from the Communist regime. After deserting his first wife in 1899, Repin lived with Natalya Nordman on her estate in Kuokkala, a Finnish seaside resort 40 km from St. Petersburg (1914–24 Petrograd, subsequently Leningrad). Even after Nordman's death in 1914, Repin remained in Kuokkala, which from 1917 until 1940 belonged to Finland. In 1948 Kuokkala was named Repino, and Repin's former home became the Repin Museum–Country Estate. On his eightieth birthday in 1924, Repin was honoured with impressive exhibitions of his works in Leningrad and Moscow, which he did not attend. Because of his advanced age, he declined the Soviet government's invitation to return to Russia, but he gladly accepted its generous financial support from 1926 until his death in 1930.²⁴

The reason that Senn thought otherwise, when he wrote the above poem, stems from a false report that Repin had starved to death near the Finnish border in July 1918,²⁵ an error perpetuated by a number of respectable reference works into the 1950s.²⁶ From the incorrectly reported circumstances of Repin's death Senn originally must have connected it with the chaotic conditions in Russia and Finland immediately after the 1917 Bolshevik revolution. While the apocalyptic view in *Der sterbende Repin* would be difficult to uphold for 1930, it certainly seems applicable to 1918. The poem's animal imagery (l. 9) links it with others Senn wrote about the anarchist terror and Bolshevik brutalities in the wake of the October Revolution.²⁷ Senn's underscorings in N.D. Morgunova–Rudnitskaia's book on the life and works of Ilya Repin (Moscow, 1965)²⁸ show that he eventually found a more reliable source, but this did not substantially affect the poem. Although not published until 1975,²⁹ it must have been written ten or more years earlier.

Notes

¹For my analysis of the two Barlach poems, cf. "Fritz Senn's Poems *Drei Bauern* and *Russisches Liebespaar*," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, vol. 8 (1990), pp. 131–145.

²Fritz Senn, *Gesammelte Gedichte und Prosa*, ed. Victor G. Doerksen (Winnipeg, 1987), pp. 88–91. Hereafter cited as ed. Doerksen. I have made the following minor corrections: *Stütlein* with an umlaut (l. 17); commas added to ll. 30 and 31.

³Cf. Karl Gutzkow, *Unter dem schwarzen Bären. Erlebtes 1811–1848*, ed. Fritz Böttger (Berlin, 1971), p. 66.

⁴*Grimms Wörterbuch*, vol. 8, col. 212.

⁵*Grimms Wörterbuch*, vol. 9, col. 362.

⁶According to *Grimms Wörterbuch*, vol. 20, col. 729, *Stute* can refer to a promiscuous woman.

⁷Similarly in Senn's poem *Am Radio*, ed. Doerksen, p. 131.

⁸Cf. my article "Fritz Senn's Poems *Drei Bauern* and *Russisches Liebespaar*" (see fn. 1), p. 135.

⁹Josef Weinheber, *Hier ist das Wort. Gedichte*. 2. Aufl. (Salzburg, 1949), p. 66.

¹⁰Josef Weinheber, *Gedichte*, ed. Friedrich Sacher (Hamburg, 1966), pp. 429–30. Copy owned by Senn is now in my possession.

¹¹*Grimms Wörterbuch*, vol. 14, cols. 991–992.

¹²*Hier ist das Wort* (see fn. 9), p. 66.

¹³For information on Repin's life and works, I have consulted N.D. Morgunova-Rudnitskaia, *Ilya Repin* (Moscow, 1965) as well as Fan and Stephen Jan Parker, *Russia on Canvas. Ilya Repin* (University Park, Pa. and London, 1980).

¹⁴Parker (see fn. 13), p. 103.

¹⁵W[illiam] P[enn] Cresson, *The Cossacks. Their History and Country* (New York, 1919), pp. 37–43; Cecil Field, *The Great Cossack* (London, [1947]), pp. 111–112; Philip Longworth, *The Cossacks* (London, [1969]), pp. 157–158; Parker (see fn. 13), p. 91.

¹⁶Cresson (see fn. 15), pp. 42–43.

¹⁷Victor Peters, *Nestor Makhno. The Life of an Anarchist* (Winnipeg, 1970), p. 32.

¹⁸George K. Epp, "Mennonite-Ukrainian Relations (1789–1945)," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, vol. 7 (1989), p. 132.

¹⁹ed. Doerksen, p. 155. In line 16, I have changed *sehnte* to *sehne*.

²⁰In line 15, 2 Corinthians 8:9; in line 19, Genesis 5:8. In light of Repin's lifelong preoccupation with Biblical subjects for many of his paintings, such allusions are certainly appropriate — as is the mention of Ivan IV (1. 11), whose cruel madness Repin portrayed in "Ivan the Terrible and His Son Ivan, November 16, 1581" (1885).

²¹Revelation, 19:20 ff.

²²Richard Wagner, *Götterdämmerung. Dritter Tag aus dem Bühnenfestspiel Der Ring des Nibelungen*, ed. Wilhelm Zentner (Stuttgart, n.d.), p. 13.

²³Josef Weinheber, *Hier ist das Wort* (see fn. 9), pp. 72, 74

²⁴Parker (see fn. 13), pp. 118–132.

²⁵Peter J. Popoff, "A Famous Russian Painter Starves," *New York Times* (Aug. 24, 1918), p. 6. This is based on a report of Repin's death in the Paris newspaper *Le Pays* on July 31, 1918.

²⁶*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 12th ed., vol. 3 (1922), p. 268; 14th ed., vol. 19 (1929), p. 160. Emerich Schaffran, *Kunstlexikon* (Wien, 1950), p. 329. *Encyclopedia Universal Illustrada*, vol. 50 (Madrid, 1954), p. 945.

²⁷Typescripts of *Einquartierung* and *Nu koubi di Wildi. 1919* from Senn's *Nachlass*, in my possession.

²⁸See fn. 13. Senn's personal copy now in my possession.

²⁹Fritz Senn, *Das Dorf im Abendgrauen. Gedichte*, ed. Elisabeth Peters (Winnipeg, 1974). This book actually appeared in May 1975.

The erroneous view that Repin died as an opponent of Communism may have been reinforced by inaccurate necrologues like the one by W. Zweyow-Dolinka in *Der Gral. Monatsschrift für Dichtung und Leben*, Vol. 25 (1930), pp. 174–175.