

THE PRE-MERZ POETRY OF KURT SCHWITTERS

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*K Schwitters*

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THE PRE-MERZ POETRY OF KURT SCHWITERS

by

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REPORT

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## I. From Stramm to Merz

It has long been a matter of habit to associate the name of Kurt Schwitters with his Merz creations when speaking of his poetry. We remember him for such poems as 'Anna Elume' and the 'Ursonate,' and, in this same connection, for those outrageously nonsensical poems which inevitably cause the reader to wonder just what the point of such an opus could possibly be - such as the following, appropriately entitled 'Doof:'

Dom

Dom

Dom Dom Dom

Dof

Dof

Dof Dof Lof

Dau

Dau

Dau Dau Dau

Den

Den

Den Den Den

Die

Die

Die Die Die

Du

Du

Du Du Du

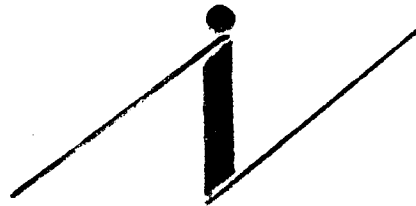
Dom

Dom

Dom Dom Dom<sup>1</sup>

Equally playful is his "i poem," which also calls to mind his declamatory statement that he, and he alone, is the "important discoverer of 'i,'" and "der Künstler des Werks des autres."<sup>2</sup>

DAS i-GEDICHT



(lies: "rauf, runter, rauf, Pünktchen drauf.")<sup>3</sup>

However, we have long overlooked the fact that six years prior to 'Das i-Gedicht,' that is, in 1917, there was an entirely different Schwitters at the work of creation, of whom we have only recently begun to become aware. It is too easy to lump all his works indiscriminately under his later style, forgetting or perhaps simply not knowing that he went through quite distinct stages of poetic development. Yet, the man who composed the 'Ursonate' had come quite a long way from his first efforts in poetry in 1917, when these appeared in Herwarth's Der Sturm. Characteristic of these poems and for his style in general of this earlier period is a poem like 'Erhabenheit (Gedicht 8):'

Kirchen türmen ein Mensch.  
 Lastet Sonne Hochgebirge.  
 Steil durchbrechen.  
 Glut verrinnt umragen Zacken.  
 Leiberheiß - seelennah.  
 Wärme umglutet Gluten!  
 Klein ich?  
 Groß!  
 Arm ich?  
 Reich!  
 Wuchtet Riesen Hochgebirge,  
 Wuchtet Riesen ich!  
 Kirchen türmen, lastet steil!  
 Gluten Mensch wuchtet lasten Sonne.  
 Ich?  
 Umglute  
 Steil!<sup>4</sup>

There is quite a difference between this poem and one like the i-poem, 'Doof,' or 'Anna Blume.' In fact, if we go back even further, we would encounter an area which has not been investigated thoroughly and which shows even less resemblance to the poems seen so far. Following is one such example of Schwitters' earliest poetry, written in 1909 and unpublished until he attached it in a postscript to his article *M e r z*, of 1920:

## HERBST

Es schweigt der Wald in Weh.  
 Er muß geduldig leiden,  
 Daß nun sein lieber Bräutigam,  
 Der Sommer, wird scheiden.

Noch hält er zärtlich ihn im Arm  
 Und quälet sich mit Schmerzen.  
 Du klagtest, Liebchen, wenn ich schied,  
 Ruht ich noch dir am Herzen.<sup>5</sup>

It is unfortunate that most of Schwitters' earliest poems are not accessible to us. Copies of Der Sturm, in which most of this poetry appeared, are difficult to track down. Schwitters' son, Ernst, has suggested an intriguing area of research in saying, "'Kurt Schwitters im Sturm' ist ein eigenes Buch wert!"<sup>6</sup>, for it would be most interesting to trace his development from those early stages on up to the style which we find in a poem like 'Erhabenheit.' To illustrate this style even further, and to point out the differences between it and that of his later, Merz poems, consider 'Ich werde erbaut (Gedicht 18):'

Kurbel dämmert Kopf Gelächter.  
 Tief zu innen zages Land.  
 Ferne Hütten welken Tau.  
 Du.



Wiesen bluten Weideschnee.

Wiesen bluten Blut.<sup>7</sup>

In trying to determine this style, even a cursory examination of these early poems will readily show the unmistakable influence of August Stramm (1874-1915), and it is with this phase of Schwitters' poetical development that this paper will concern itself. Schwitters himself acknowledged this influence in the No. 20 issue of MERZ, where he wrote:

Ich begann in der Dichtung im Jahre 1917, mit einer Gestaltung, ähnlich der äußeren Form August Stramms. Bald gewann ich eine eigene Form, in meiner dadaistischen Zeit. Sie kennen ja alle mein Gedicht an Anna Blume.<sup>8</sup>

Now let us take a couple of Stramm's own works to illustrate the similarity:

#### VORFRÜHLING

Pralle Wolken jagen sich in Pfützen  
 Aus frischen Leibesbrüchen schreien Halme Ströme  
 Die Schatten stehn erschöpft  
 Auf kreischt die Luft  
 Im Kreisen, weht und heult und wälzt sich  
 Und Risse schlitzten jählings sich  
 Und narben  
 Am grauen Leib

Das Schweigen tappet schwer herab  
Und lastet!

Da rollt das Licht sich auf  
Jäh gelb und springt  
Und Flecken spritzen -  
Verbleicht

Und

Pralle Wolken tummeln sich in Pfützen.<sup>9</sup>

#### ALLMACHT

Forschen Fragen  
Du trägst Antwort  
Fliehen Fürchten  
Du stehst Mut!  
Stank und Unrat  
Du breitest Reine  
Falsch und Tücke  
Du lachst Recht!  
Wahn Verzweiflung  
Du schmiegst Selig  
Tod und Elend  
Du wärmst Reich!  
Hoch und Abgrund  
Du bogst Wege  
Hölle Teufel  
Du siegst Gott!<sup>10</sup>

Several features stand out sharply which we have come to identify as being uniquely Stramm-Stil, and which we feel again in Schwitters' early poetry. The most obvious of these are the linguistic techniques. We shall devote the first part of our investigation to these linguistic features common to the two poets and then examine those characteristics which distinguish them. When we take up these distinguishing traits, we shall see that Schwitters, even in his early period, did more than just imitate Stramm. There were those who did no more than ape this style and got literally stuck, never to develop their individual talents.

In Stramm's 'Allmacht' above, the most apparent linguistic techniques which distinguish his style from those of previous poets are found in the use of the verb: intransitive verbs used transitively (Du breitst Reine), infinitives whose functions hover between that of verb and that of noun (Forschen Fragen...Fliehen Fürchten), and verbs which lack a prefix where logic tells us there should be one, e.g. "Du (er)wärmst Reich," or "Du (ver)breitst Reine." What Stramm actually achieved through these linguistic innovations was to pack intensity and power into a poetical statement by means of the most condensed, abrupt use of language elements. Throughout the poem, the subject or direct object occurs after the verb, either as the object of that verb (as in lines 1-6: Du trägst Antwort... Du breitst Reine...), or in apposition to the subject pronoun Du (As in lines 7 ff.:

Du wärmst Reich, i.e., "Du, Reich, wärmst.") A prose paraphrase of any two given lines will reveal how much has been compressed into Stramm's elemental language: "Auf Erforschen und auf Fragen trägst Du die Antwort," for "Forschen Fragen/ Du trägst Antwort," or again, "Ihr, Ihr Wege, umbiegt die Höhen und den Abgrund," for "Hoch und Abgrund/ Du bogst Wege!"

Furthermore, although the omission of the definite and indefinite article is nothing new in poetry, it very definitely makes the juxtaposition of unrelated grammatical elements stand out all the more starkly here, and allows extensive use of another incongruity, namely the use of an adverb as a noun, as shown above or in these lines:

Wahn Verzweiflung  
Du schmiegst Selig

Which is to say, "Mitten im Wahn und in der Verzweiflung schmiegst Du Dich, Seligkeit, herein!"

Similar techniques are employed in Schwitters' own poetry, as in 'An Johannes Molzahn (Gedicht 37).' Here, too, the infinitive functions as noun-or-verb, intransitive verbs are used transitively, there are missing prefixes, and the article is omitted.

Kreisen Welten Du.

Du kreist Welten.

Du überwindest zwitschern Apyl, den Wassern die Maschine.

Welten schleudern Raum.  
 Du schleuderst Welten Raum.  
 Welten wenden die neue Maschine Dir.  
 Dir.  
 Du, deiner die neue Maschine Raum.  
 Und Achsen brechen Ewigkeit.  
 Das Werk, dem wir, uns Erbe, Du.<sup>11</sup>

Is Kreisen the verb of Welten? Or do these two juxtaposed infinitives have no other function than that of "to circle" (or "circling," if one pleases) and "to world" (or "worlding")? Why does the verb kreisen in the second line not have the proper prefix um-? Like Stramm, Schwitters makes an infinitive (Welten) the direct object of an intransitive verb, "Du kreist Welten." And in a bold variation of Stramm's pairs of substantives (Forschen Fragen... Wahn Verzweiflung...), Schwitters places similar pairs of substantives at the end of a syntactical string, where the object alone might ordinarily be expected: "Du schleuderst Welten Raum" and "Du, deiner die neue Maschine Raum."

The fact that Schwitters does vary the techniques introduced by Stramm indicates already that Schwitters is not a mere imitator. If Stramm omits the definite article, Schwitters throws in a baffling array of its inflected forms: "Du überwindest zwitschern Apyl, den Wassern die Maschine," and "Das Werk, dem wir, uns Erbe, Du." (!)

As another illustration of Stramm's influence on Schwitters, compare 'Vorfrühling' above with the latter's 'Nächte (Gedicht 7)':

Innige Nächte  
Gluten Qual  
Zittert Glut Wonne  
Schmerzhaft umeint  
Siedend nächtigt Brunst  
Peitscht Feuer Blitz  
Zuckend Schwüle.  
O wenn ich das Fischlein baden könnte!  
Zagt ein Innen  
Zittert enteint  
Giert schwül  
Herb  
Du -  
Duft der Braut  
Rosen gleißen im Garten.  
Schlank stachelt Fisch in der Peitschlufft.  
Wunden Knie  
Wogen Brandung Wonne  
O diese Qual, daß ich nicht fliegen kann!  
Ich sehne deine Wogen  
Du!  
Meine Glut fiebert Tod!  
Ich umwoge  
Innenjauchzt

Peitscht still Inbrunst  
 Überquillt schrill.  
 Kniet Tau auf dem Fischlein  
 Es schlüpft seine Beinchen.  
 Weiße Beinchen hat das Fischlein.  
 Weiße Augen hat der Tod!  
 Blau leuchtet innig  
 Fest peitscht innig Nacht.  
 Ich  
 Zerwoge  
 Bleicht müde  
 Blaut Qual Sonne.<sup>12</sup>

Bizarre neologisms are another Stramm feature ("Peitschluf-  
 luft" in line 16 above, "Leibesbruch" in line 2 of 'Vorfrühling').  
 But neologisms have always been with us, and even Stramm's  
 "schamzerpört" (in 'Freudenhaus,' constructed out of the noun  
 "Scham" plus the verbal prefix denoting complete destruction  
 "zer-" plus the past participial ending "-pört" of "empört")  
 could conceivably become a normal adjective. Schwitters'  
 "innenjauchzt" belongs in this category. But what is even  
 more bizarre, and what attracted many to it, is the complete  
 lack of referential points for such baffling juxtapositions as:  
 "Schlank stachelt Fisch in der Peitschluf," or Stramm's "aus  
 frischen Leibesbrüchen schreien Halme Ströme" in 'Vorfrühling.'  
 The same kind of verbal collage is found throughout Stramm's  
 work, as in 'Untreu': "Vergessen/ Bröckeln nach die Hände!"

Schwitters carries this principle - and a principle it is - to its logical extreme in his poem, 'Am Rande meines Welkens bin ich sanfte Nacht (Gedicht 14).'

Sägen knien Regen welken Tage  
 Sanften fromme Tiefe sanfte Hände  
 Tropfen wunde Nächte nächtelang  
 Wunden sanfte Riesen wölben Dom.<sup>13</sup>

The principle to which I refer is one which was first articulated by Filippo Marinetti in his "Manifesto tecnico della letteratura futurista" of 1912, in which he posited the principles for a new kind of literature. Such a literature, according to Futurism, should be purged of elements extraneous to the pure word, which are added to the latter through the writer's own interfering ego. Thus, adjectives, adverbs and punctuation should be abolished, nouns should occur in pairs, and only the infinitive form of the verb should be employed:

Si deve usare il verbo all'infinito, perchè si adatti elasticamente al sostantivo e non lo sottoponga all'io dello scrittore che osserva o immagina. Il verbo all'infinito può, solo, dare il senso della continuità della vita e l'elasticità dell'intuizione che la percepisce.

Si deve abolire l'aggettivo perchè il sostantivo nudo conservi il suo colore essenziale. L'aggettivo avendo in sè un carattere di sfumatura, è inconcepibile



con la nostra visione dinamica, poichè suppone una sosta, una meditazione.

Si deve abolire l'avverbio, vecchia fibbia che tiene unite l'una all'altra le parole. L'avverbio conserva alla frase una fastidiosa unità di tono.

Ogni sostantivo deve avere il suo doppio, cioè il sostantivo deve essere seguito, senza congiunzione, dal sostantivo a cui è legato per analogia. Esempio: uomo-torpediniera, donna-golfo, folla-risacca, piazza-imbuto, porta-rubinetto.....

Abolire anche la punteggiatura.<sup>14</sup>

Few understood Marinetti's message as well as did Stramm and Schwitters. They isolated adjectives, created new ones, eliminated different forms of the verb and assigned their own values to the old forms (Schwitters: "Wuchtet Riesen ich!", Stramm: "Du bannt die Zeit/ Du boqt der Kreis/ Du seelt der Geist/ Du blickt der Blick..."). By isolating the infinitive, or the noun, or the adjective, they focused attention upon that element itself, which eschewed all reference points outside itself. The word no longer "connoted" anything in the real world, it connoted itself. But the words were not arbitrarily strung out together, their juxtapositions yielded a planned work of art that is apparent in its overall mood and tone. A good illustration of this can be seen in the frankly erotic mood of 'Nächte.' Indeed, some of the images

conjured up by Schwitters' choice of words and juxtapositions even seem conventional to the point that they may be considered "classical." "Innige Nächte/ Gluten Qual" and "Siedend näch-tigt Brunst" are a very concrete expression of the heat of passion that carries the lover through the throes of ecstasy ("O diese Qual, daß ich nicht fliegen kann!") and on to climax:

Meine Glut fiebert Tod!  
 Ich umwoge  
 Innenjauchzt  
 Peitscht still Inbrunst  
 Überquillt schrill.

And even without the benefit of Marinetti's program as a guide, we can see that there is Promethean "Erhabenheit" in Schwitters' 'Erhabenheit:'

Klein ich?  
 Groß!  
 Arm ich?  
 Reich!  
 Wuchtet Riesen Hochgebirge,  
 Wuchtet Riesen ich!

One wonders whether "fillers" as articles, subordinating conjunctions and the proper inflection of the verb really are necessary, after all. Would not the impact of the last two lines above, for example, be lessened by the diversion created

by two different verb forms for wuchten? Following the rules of conventional grammar, a different Schwitters might have written:

Wuchtet das Hochgebirge wie Riesen,  
So wuchte ich auch wie Riesen!

Similarly, the atmosphere in Stramm's 'Schwermut' was exactly and deliberately that, that of "Schwermut:"

Schreiten Streben  
Leben sehnt  
Schauern Stehen  
Blicke suchen  
Sterben wächst  
Das Kommen  
Schreit!  
Tief  
Stummen  
Wir.<sup>15</sup>

And there was fear and tense uncertainty in the patrol of 'Patrouille:'

Die Steine feinden  
Fenster grinst Verrat  
Äste würgen  
Berge Sträucher blättern raschlig  
Gellen  
Tod.<sup>16</sup>

Even during his "Stramm Period," there are fundamental differences in Schwitters' style from that of his mentor which remain consistent all throughout the former's development. One always has the sense of being confronted with a serious tone in a Stramm poem. Thus, there is the seriousness of evil and impending catastrophe in the 'Patrouille' poem and the seriousness of a pensive, yearning spirit in 'Schwermut.' Rarely does one encounter a carefree spirit of levity or gaiety in a Stramm poem.

Consider the heavy, martial rhythms and tone of awe and wonder in 'Allmacht.' This is the invocation of a primitive soul to the almighty Deity, in an elemental language far removed from, say, the polished language of an 18th century poet such as Goethe. Aside from Goethe's defiance of the gods in 'Prometheus,' the main difference between his and Stramm's attitudes lies in degree of civilized expression. Their attitude towards the Deity, however, is basically the same. Next to Stramm's primordial ejaculations to an almighty Presence, Goethe's language may seem almost precious, and while Goethe's message is delivered in the style of a diplomat delivering a frosty note of displeasure, Stramm's poem is uttered in the grunts of Primitive Man, but both men still take their subject s e r i o u s l y. Stramm recognizes the omnipotence of the Divinity and stands in awe of it, and the result is his ponderous litany of homage to that power.

How much different is the tone of a Schwitters poem!

Even when the language is definitely that inherited from Stramm, the primordial soul speaking it has such a levity in its voice as to be downright impudent, exasperatingly so. One wonders whether the kind of impudence towards a sublime subject contained in a poem like 'Erhabenheit' has been unjustly excluded from what we are accustomed to calling poetry, and whether Goethe would or could have been capable of the same kind of impudence when he wrote: "Ich kenne nichts Ärmeres/ Unter der Sonn' als euch, Götter!"<sup>17</sup> Was this being impudent? Certainly it was being defiant, and Goethe may well have congratulated himself on "really telling the gods where to get off."

Schwitters never seems to have been troubled by this much seriousness. The problem of man's relation to the universal does not seem to have existed for him. When he does treat of the supernatural, as in 'Erhabenheit,' there is absolutely no defiance there, and certainly not the awed reverence of Stramm. In 'Erhabenheit,' he is very plainly acting the clown, and we can imagine the exasperation of the Deity wishing it had its good, old-fashioned worshippers and blasphemers once more.

This levity is of the same sort which encounters us poor mortals in such irrelevant interjections as:

Ach, es geht mir etwas besser, ich bin nur neunmal heute ohnmächtig geworden!<sup>18</sup>

Hyperbole is the key to Schwitters' tone, and if we have learned to accept hyperbole in our everyday speech ("I'm dying to meet you!"), it is also true that we have learned to appreciate the absolutely "zany" jokes of the 1960's built entirely on nonsensical hyperboles ("What's purple and hums?" "An electric grape." "Why does it hum?" "It doesn't know the words.") We have grown up with an attitude already responsive to the nonsensical levity in Schwitters. A total lack of seriousness and deliberate spoofing of Sublime Feeling is evident in his 'Erhabenheit' and other poems, even when he seems to be most influenced by Stramm's language techniques. Consider, for example, the lack of sentimentality in what is obviously a love poem, 'Goldene Stäbe (Gedicht 26):'

Herbsten Zelte,  
 Herbsten Schwäne Liebe?  
 Glut zerbröckelt Leichenwein  
 Faden stoppelt Mückentanz  
 Unitas zerdomen Schwäne.  
 Du, Luise!  
 Blume blüetet Abend strömen Stäbe.  
 Du, Luise!<sup>19</sup>

Schwitters would not have been his own Schwitters, then, if he had not had his own gift of poetry. As a beginning poet, he did indeed follow in the tradition of Stramm, but he was not a slavish follower. This is apparent even in those early poems mentioned above. Even then he stopped along the way,

as it were, to pick up innocent, banal objects to insert into his art, much as he was to do with his collages, paintings and sculptures. A strand of hair, a tram ticket, a broken piece of crockery, of glass, of wood - nothing was useless or out of place for him. There was a crystal-clear logic in the composition of his Merz poems, the most famous being, of course, 'An Anna Blume: Merzgedicht 1,' that logic being: "Why not?"

Du trägst den Hut auf deinen Füßen und wanderst auf die Hände, auf den Händen wanderst du ...

Blau ist die Farbe deines gelben Haares.

Rot ist das Girren deines grünen Vogels.<sup>20</sup>

Schwitters expounded this logic in detail in 1919 in his article "Merz," which appeared in 1921 in Der Ararat.<sup>21</sup> Speaking of the cover for his anthology "Anna Blume," published in Verlag Paul Steegemann, he writes:

Auf demselben Umschlag ist eine Windmühle, ein Kopf, eine rückfahrende Lokomotive und ein Mann gezeichnet, der in der Luft hängt. Das bedeutet weiter nichts, als daß in der Welt, in der Anna Blume lebt, in der Menschen auf dem Kopf gehen, Windmühlen sich drehen und Lokomotiven rückwärts fahren, auch Dada existiert... Lokomotiven fahren von hinten und von vorne. Warum soll eine Lokomotive nicht einmal rückwärts fahren?<sup>22</sup>

This kind of reasoning has nothing to do with the destruction of reason or art, as proclaimed in the Dada manifestoes of Huelsenbeck and Mehring. It is rather the solidly traditional quest of the serious artist for heretofore unexploited elements to employ in art. This quest is evident all throughout Schwitters' work. The world of 'Anna Blume' did not arise overnight, out of nothing. There is a direct line of development from 'Grünes Kind (Gedicht 1)' to 'Anna Blume,' which is best seen in these lines:

Liebes Kind -

Grünes -

Weint Kind?

Schwefelgelbes Kind, wie feuerrot bist Du!

.....

Nein!

Seilen nur -

Geben zurück -

Blutrot zurück -

Grünes Kind, wie siehst du blutrot aus!<sup>23</sup>

Compare "Blau ist die Farbe deines gelben Haares" and "Rot ist das Girren deines grünen Vogels" in 'Anna Blume.'

Going back even further, this development could have been predicted in Stramm's own poetry. The condensed juxtapositions of such incongruous elements as "Nacht grant Glas" in 'Verzweifelt' and "Halme Ströme" in 'Vorfrühling' are actually



the first stage of a later, expanded juxtaposition found in "blau...gelbes Haar" and "schwefelgelbes...feuerrotes (Kind)." Schwitters could now afford to insert regular predicates and conjunctions to produce a juxtaposition even more incongruous than the previous ones. Since this incongruity is a regular syntactical string, it is more fluid and more surprising than the compressed model, in which the element of surprise runs the risk of being glossed over.

What further distinguishes not only 'Anna Blume' and the Nerz poems, but also Schwitters' early poetry in the Stramm manner from Stramm's own style is their total lack of pathos - a pathos that permeates all of Stramm's works and which Schwitters allowed only as another element to be juxtaposed with banality. Nowhere in Schwitters do we find the stark, grim emptiness of 'Urtod:'

Raum  
 Zeit  
 Raum  
 Wegen  
 Regen  
 Richten  
 Raum  
 Zeit  
 Raum  
 Dehnen  
 Einen

Mehren

Raum

Zeit

Raum

Kehren

Wehren

Becken

Raum

Zeit

Raum

Ringeln

Werfen

Würgen

Raum

Zeit

Raum

Fallen

Sinken

Stürzen

Raum

Zeit

Raum

Wirbeln

Raum

Zeit

Raum

Wirren

Raum  
 Zeit  
 Raum  
 Flirren  
 Raum  
 Zeit  
 Raum  
 Irren  
 Nichts.<sup>24</sup>

The finality of this terrible "Nichts," crashing upon our nervous system as would the judge's "Guilty!" or Mephisto's "Ist gerichtet!", was alien to Schwitters. He cannot even be "apocalyptic" long enough in an apocalyptic poem, 'Die Welt (Gedicht 2):'

Häuser fallen, Himmel stürzen ein.

Bäume ragen über Bäume.

Himmel grünt rot.

Silberne Fische schwimmen in der Luft.

Sie verbrennen sich nicht.

Sie sind ja so innig.

Im ewigen Silber glänzt ihre Frühe.

Und der Wahn schwillt heran und brüstet sich über die Himmel.

Millionen silberne Fische zittern über die Weite.

Doch sengen sie nicht ihre silbernen Flügel.

Sanft weht die Luft vom silbernen Flügelschlag.

Brüsten sich Menschen -  
 Knien Seelen -  
 Riesengroß wächst der Wahn über die Weite.<sup>25</sup>

Schwitters would have said, "Why not? Why shouldn't the angels of vengeance look like silver fish swimming through the ether on Judgement Day?" The fact is, this kind of imagery was also a tradition, one which dated back to Georg Heym, whose Christ cracked under the embrace of the betrayer Judas ("Er umarmet den Gott, der dünn wie aus Silber/ Unter ihm knickt."<sup>26</sup>) In the Stramm tradition, he makes the "early dawn" (Frühe) radiate in "eternal silver" (line 7), and the souls to kneel (in the penultimate line.)

There were also imitators of Stramm who had neither his personality and vision, nor their own individuality. With all the careful observance they could muster, they tried to duplicate the Stramm style. The result can be seen in efforts such as Kurt Heinar's 'Mondmorgen:'

Todesüber lächeln leise  
 weint  
 weißen Tod  
 lacht tränenleer  
 Bleichglutgleiten weichen  
 Strahlumweiten wieder  
 Sinkt der Zittermond  
 und küßt die Erde

sonnenvoll  
 Mond Ermorden  
 Morgen  
 Singt  
 und weint  
 In mir<sup>24</sup>

The linguistic techniques certainly are there: Neologisms in the Stramm manner obviously made a favorable impression here ("todesüber," "bleichglutgleiten," "Zittermond"), as did also isolated infinitives ("Bleichglutgleiten weichen," "Mond Ermorden") and intransitive verbs used transitively ("weint weihen Tod"). The contrived image of the moon full of sun could be considered daring, perhaps: "Sinkt der Zittermond/ und küßt die Erde/ sonnenvoll," but this and the following image ("Morgen/ singt/ und weint/ In mir") still come out sounding like stock lyrical clichés. There is nothing really new about the moon kissing the earth or the morning singing and crying within us. And the neologisms and verb contortions have a forced, artificial sound about them.

Kurt Heynicke's 'Sterne' also shows how much Stramm impressed poets of his day:

Sterne reigen tiefe Nacht.  
 Hoch ihr Sterne meiner Brust zu singen.  
 Sterne fragen tief hinab.  
 Tief ihr Sterne mich zu beugen.

Weit ihr Sterne meiner Seele  
 glühhinab im Schoß der Nächte!  
 Blutentfacht Jubelleuchten  
 helle Dämmernis der Ferne  
 tauumtauft mein Haar zu feuchten  
 gottumflossen  
 o ihr Sterne in den Nächten!<sup>28</sup>

Those familiar with Heynicke's poetry will sense that he is speaking in a foreign idiom in this poem, that he cannot bring himself to break completely with his "Bruder Mensch" attitude towards the universe. The result is almost Romantic: "Hoch ihr Sterne meiner Brust zu singen," "Tief ihr Sterne mich zu beugen," and "tauumtauft mein Haar zu feuchten" are a step backwards, to Brentano rhythms.

It required a good deal of impudence and self-assertion to write in the Stramm tradition and maintain at the same time one's own style. Schwitters shows this kind of individuality when he leaves his imagery obscurer and vaguer than Stramm ever did. We have mentioned the tone differences in the two. The most concrete and complete images are readily evident in Stramm's poetry, as is the kind of pathos in the mood he wishes to convey. Consider these elements in 'Vorfrühling,' above. The images of glaring clouds seen chasing each other in murky puddles opens and closes the poem, giving it its thematic unity. The earth is seen as a grayed-out, dormant body whose scars and pores and cracks begin to sprout plant shoots and

fresh streams in the form of screams. In 'Patrouille,' the Satanic character of the window that grins betrayal and the death that screams out from silent objects in nature are again complete, concrete images, as are the antithetical forces incanted in the litany 'Allmacht:' "Fliehen Fürchten" versus "Du stehst Mut;" "Stank und Unrat" are overpowered by "Du breitst Reine," "Falsch und Tücke" by "Du lachst Recht," etc.

Stramm's imitators failed in their efforts because they overdid themselves in trying to see the universe as he did. Schwitters, though he saw essentially the same universe, saw it through his own eyes and interpreted it accordingly, instead of trying to pretend he was someone else. Thus, where Stramm recited the forces of fear and courage, filth and purity, wrong and right in the cosmos, Schwitters proclaimed these sublime forces in his poem to end all sublimity ('Erhabenheit'):

Klein ich?  
 Groß!  
 Arm ich?  
 Reich!  
 Wuchtet Riesen Hochgebirge,  
 Wuchtet Riesen ich!

It is significant that Schwitters is seen employing the insignificant with increasing frequency after 1918. An example may be seen in the fragmentary character of 'Abend (Gedicht 25):'

Glut streichelt sanfte Welten Kuß  
 Pfiff Sonne Faden Sonne (Zeppelin)  
 Ich Faden Sonne Glimmerglanz  
 Und Glimmergluten sanftet Welt.<sup>29</sup>

The language is still that of Stramm, but what imagery is left is at best contained in the individual words being played off against each other: Pfiff against Sonne, then Faden also against Sonne, then a parenthetical item which may or may not be relevant to the preceding string. In the following line, ich probably no longer has its traditionally grammatical value of "I, the speaker, the one experiencing the sentiments expressed in this poem," but is rather a totally isolated item which Schwitters liked and decided to place next to Faden. He also likes the combination of Sonne with a "bright, shiny word," so he places it next to his word-creation Glimmerglanz.

Such was the relationship of the early Schwitters with his mentor Stramm. It is easy to see how he might have employed Stramm's linguistic techniques for no other reason than that he liked them, that he enjoyed playing off isolated infinitives against each other, and nouns against adjectives which do not fit those nouns. And to counterbalance "pious depths" by "soft hands," and to make "nights" "physically sore" "all night long" - well, why not?



We saw just this arrangement above, in 'Am Rande meines Welkens bin ich sanfte Nacht.' Besides the levity of tone, there is another quality here which should not escape attention, namely, the mood evoked by such juxtapositions as in the lines:

Sanften fromme Tiefe sanfte Hände  
Troofen wunde Mächte nachtelang ...

Even in the absence of conventional syntax, a poet can still create a lyrical mood, using only the most elementary collocations of words. It is not an arbitrary playing-off of elements against other elements, but rather an arrangement planned to yield a certain effect, whether it be the lyricism of 'Sanfte Nacht' or the ludicrous bravado of 'Erhabenheit.'

In Anna Blume und ich,<sup>30</sup> Schwitters' son Ernst warns us not to be so foolish as those critics and detractors of his father who turned their backs upon him. They could have done themselves a great favor, he says, had they read his article Merz, which explained in detail just what his credo as an artist was. Having read it, they would have seen just how consistent Schwitters was in his development as poet and artist:

Das Material ist so unwesentlich wie ich selbst.  
Wesentlich ist das Formen. Weil das Material  
unwesentlich ist, nehme ich jedes beliebige Material,  
wenn es das Bild verlangt. Indem ich verschieden-  
artige Materialien gegeneinander abstimme, habe ich  
gegenüber der nur-Ölmalerei ein Plus, da ich außer

Farbe gegen Farbe, Linie gegen Linie, Form gegen Form usw. noch Material gegen Material, etwa Holz gegen Sackleinen werte.<sup>31</sup> (*Italics mine.*)

We have seen how Schwitters followed this idea in his poetry, even in his earliest works, and those who are familiar with his Merz paintings and collages and sculptures will be aware of the Schwitters idea in practice. As regards poetry, he went on to say:

Elemente der Dichtkunst sind Buchstaben, Silben, Worte, Sätze. Durch Werten der Elemente gegeneinander entsteht die Poesie. Der Sinn ist nur wesentlich, wenn er auch als Faktor gewertet wird. Ich werte Sinn gegen Unsinn. Den Unsinn bevorzuge ich, aber das ist eine rein persönliche Angelegenheit. Mir tut der Unsinn leid, daß er bislang so selten künstlerisch geformt wurde, deshalb liebe ich Unsinn.<sup>32</sup> (*Italics mine.*)

This was written in 1920. His early poems are evidence that it was not a spontaneous decision, that it was not a whimsical, flighty idea to play off sense against nonsense. It was a concrete statement about he was actually going about his business as an artist, not about how art should be or about how he would like to create art: "Ich werte Sinn gegen Unsinn," not "Ich werde werten" or "Wir sollen werten."

Schwitters' consistently independent style made enemies,

which is worth a report in itself. The fact that he did not submit to the doctrinaire anarchy of certain Dadaists annoyed Huelsenbeck and his followers. The fact that he was not any more worried about Nazism than about Communism angered not only zealots on both sides, but caused consternation to his friends as well. His tragedy consisted in the fact that he honestly believed in his principle of art for its own sake, free to develop according to its own instincts and uninfluenced by any social, political or economic considerations. It was his tragedy that things did not work out the way he had imagined when he wrote in his 'Manifest Proletkunst:'

So banal es an sich klingt, ist es im Grunde dasselbe, ob jemand ein rotes Heer mit Trotzky an der Spitze oder ein kaiserliches Heer mit Napoleon an der Spitze malt. Für den Wert des Bildes als Kunstwerk ist es aber gleichgültig, ob proletarische Instinkte oder patriotische Gefühle erweckt werden sollen...DAS, WAS WIR HINGEGEN VORBEREITEN, IST DAS GESAMTKUNSTWERK, WELCHES ERHABEN IST ÜBER ALLE PLAKATE, OB SIE FÜR SEKT, DADA ODER KOMMUNISTISCHE DIKTATUR GEMACHT SIND.<sup>33</sup>

There was no place for such an innocent concept of art in the minds of political Dadaists, nor in Nazi Germany. In 1940, he was forced to flee from his own countrymen.

Schwitters' love for the innocent and the incongruous

prompted him to move constantly towards new modes of expression, thus shedding eventually all traces of the Stramm tradition. Snatches of conversation, children's talk, and Beamtendeutsch, when patched together, produced a poem like the following, in which traces of Stramm are still evident, though no longer to the degree as previously:

EIN VIERTEL DER GEFÜHLE DES GREISES AUTOMATO

AUF SEINER STAMMBURG ATHO

Eine Romanze

Atho.

Auto.

Automato.

Der Hund glotzt den Schluck um die Achse des Likörs.

Wer hat hier die Reibeisen aufgestachelt?

Daß sie wider mich glotzen!

Schratoschematismus äugt blinke Augen.

Das Kalb ist tot.

Am Hühnerpopo steht eine Leiter.

Straßenbahnen fahren darauf hin und her.

Drahtlos.

Poco sonore.

Automatisch.

Der Hund wärmt das innere Feld.

Wenn der wilde Wein blüht.

Mir juckt das linke Auge.

Das Kalb bleibt tot.

Radfahrer haben die ihnen vorgeschriebenen Wege innezuhalten.<sup>34</sup>

As in his earlier poems in the Stramm manner, this one also has isolated nouns, adjectives and bizarre juxtapositions. But Schwitters plays with these elements to a degree not seen before. Rather than making a cult out of Stramm, he plays with his neologisms for the sheer enjoyment of it: "Atho./ Äuto./ Automato." Further, he alone could make German Officialese sound enjoyable, namely by situating it in a most irreverant and unexpected spot. The collage he creates here is as harmless and unpretentious as the perforated tramway stubs he loved to collect.

Beamtendeutsch loses its forbidding character also in 'Die Buchführung beim kleinen Handwerker:'

Ich gehe  
 Du gehst  
 Ich gehe  
 Du gehst  
 Ich gehe gehe  
 Du gehst gehst  
 Geht  
 Ich laufe  
 Du läufst  
 Ich schreie Gier

Du schreist Schrei  
 Ich stürze Sturz  
 Du stürzest mich  
 Schuttabladen verboten!<sup>35</sup>

It is interesting to speculate whether August Stramm might have followed a similar course of development, had his career not been cut short by the war. Kurt Schwitters is a good example of one possibility of development. This development was possible, however, only by virtue of his personality - a personality marked by a levity of spirit, without bitterness, without protest, without a social message in his works. In the Germany of the '20's - A Germany defeated in war, despised by her neighbors, exploited by her conquerers, a Germany whose people lived a threadbare existence - a few more artists of Schwitters' type, with his playfulness, innocence and sophisticated naïveté might have had a salubrious effect. His Merz poems, developing from his "Stramm period," gradually eased away from linguistic derring-do and provided one of the few bright spots in the dismal period of the 1920's. Poor nonsense, which had been neglected for so long, began to be employed for a new art's sake, for the sake of doing nothing more than to delight. Such poems are 'Die Buchführung beim kleinen Handwerker,' 'Ziereviere,' 'Wand' and 'Zwölf:'

Eins Zwei Drei Vier Fünf  
 Fünf Vier Drei Zwei Eins  
 Zwei Drei Vier Fünf Sechs

Sechs Fünf Vier Drei Zwei  
 Sieben Sieben Sieben Sieben Sieben  
 Acht Eins  
 Neun Eins  
 Zehn Eins  
 Elf Eins  
 Zehn Neun Acht Sieben Sechs  
 Fünf Vier Drei Zwei Eins.<sup>36</sup>

Certainly, the new Schwitters poems are pure joy and nonsense. But even in his most nonsensical moments, this poet follows a logic, a rationale as cold and clear as the most conventional dictates of verse, meter and form. In 'Zwölf,' the first four lines are built on two different kinds of number progressions: "one" to "five" and backwards, then "two" to "six" and backwards, followed by a row of five "seven's," followed by four lines of numbers, beginning with "eight" upwards, which arch back to their base number "one," and finally, after "eleven," a neat countdown from "ten" back to "one."<sup>37</sup>

Why not? "Lokomotives run in both directions. Why shouldn't a locomotive run backwards now and then?"<sup>38</sup>

Schwitters' homage to Stramm in 'Portrait Rudolf Blümner (Gedicht 30)' would have pleased the latter:

Der Stimme schwendet Kopf verquer die Beine.  
 Greizt Arme qualte schlingern Knall um Knall.  
 Unstrahlend ezen Kriesche quäke Dreiz.

Und Knall um Knall.

Verquer den Knall zerrasen Fetzen Strammscher quill.

Und Knall um Knall.

Und Knall um Knall.

Kreuzt Arme beinen quillt den Stuhl.

Der Stuhl ist eine Schraube, klammerwinden Stramm.

Und Knall um Knall der Stimme köpft.

Die Beine schrauben Arme würgend ließ.<sup>39</sup>

In his turn, Kurt Schwitters was rendered the following tribute by Christof Spengemann:

Er malte das Bildnis der Zeit und wußte es nicht.

Nun kniet er vor einem Gänseblümchen und betet.<sup>40</sup>



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- 37 Cf. John Christopher Middleton, "Pattern Without Predictability, or: Pythagoras Saved. A Comment on Kurt Schwitters' 'Gedicht 25,'" German Life and Letters, XXII, no. 3 (1969).
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## II. A Schwitters Bibliography

To date, the most comprehensive source of information on Kurt Schwitters is Werner Schmalenbach's monumental work, Kurt Schwitters (see below). A 404-page book, it contains about 400 illustrations and extensive documentation, including bibliography. As of this writing, the University does not have this book in its collection, and I have consequently had to limit my bibliography to works to which I was able to find access. The short bibliography given here is divided into these categories:

A. Primary literature. Works by Schwitters used for the foregoing essay are marked by \*.

B. Specific secondary literature on Schwitters. Works which I have used in my report are marked by \*.

C. General secondary literature in which reference is made to Schwitters or pertinent information. Works used in this essay are marked by \*.

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