

## Transcending the Self: A Program Note to *Winterreise*

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*The snows descended on my head... Cold, want, and fatigue were the least pains I was destined to endure; I was cursed by some devil and carried about with me my eternal hell... Follow me, I seek the everlasting ices of the north...* (Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*)

The words are those of another Wanderer whose demons lead him to the icy regions of the Self. As Victor Frankenstein pursues the monster – his brain-child and dangerous Doppelgänger – in Mary Shelley’s famous novel, he embarks on a frozen journey into the recesses of his own psyche – a journey in which the elements become metaphors for the long winter of the heart. This same theme, with its myriad Romantic repercussions, is the controlling metaphor of the cycle of poems by Wilhelm Müller, *Die Winterreise*, which Franz Schubert set in 1827, the year before his own premature death.

Born in Dessau in 1794, Wilhelm Müller was a child of the Age of Revolution – a philologist, historian, and poet, whose intellectual interests embraced Greek and Roman literature, German folklore, opera and drama, and contemporary German and English poetry. Among the Anglo-writers whose work he knew and admired – the Shelleys, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats – he retained a special love for Lord Byron, whose biography he wrote, whose work he translated and championed, and whose Wanderlust and philhellenism he espoused. His identification with the English poet as well as his own *Griechenlieder* (forty-seven poems on which much of his 19th century reputation was based and which inspired other famous works of art such as Delacroix’s painting, *Greece Expiring on the Ruins of Missolonghi*) written between 1821-1826, bestowed on Müller the epithet of “The German Byron.”

Begun in 1822 and completed in 1824, the year of Byron’s death on the plains of Missolonghi where he had come to fight for Greek independence, Müller’s cycle of twenty-four poems, *Die Winterreise*, is rich in traditional Romantic imagery, at the same time that it employs universal archetypes. As with all works of art, the cycle was born not in isolation, (as vividly demonstrated by the Frankenstein parallel) but rather within a contemporary context, which had roots in the past and outreaches to the future. The mythos of the Wanderer and of the winter journey,

while favorite themes for the Romantics, boast a long history that extends back to ancient civilization at the same time that it marches forward from its nineteenth century popularity onto the pages of twentieth century culture.

Throughout the cultural history of the Western world from Antiquity to late 19th century, the figure of the Wanderer appears in several distinct manifestations. In the epic vein he is a hero with superhuman traits (Achilles, Odysseus, Siegfried, Parzival, or Dante) or a god with anthropomorphic ones (Nordic myth's Wotan turned Wanderer, the transmigratory Zeus, or the peripatetic Finn & Oisín of Anglo-Celtic legend). In the picaresque genre the voyager appears as pilgrim (Chaucer's Canterbury travelers), Crusader (Rodrigo of *La Poema del Cid* or Roland of *Le Roman de Roland* and Orlando *Furioso*, and Scott's *Ivanhoe*), rogue (the highwayman MacHeath or the amorous bastard Tom Jones), or questing idealist (Voltaire's *Candide*, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*). In travel literature he surfaces as the impressionable protagonist of the *Bildungsroman* – the traveler experiencing the *Wanderjahr* as an educational voyage (Wilhelm Meister, Gulliver, Fanny Burney or Tristram Shandy). And finally he debuts as Romantic Wanderer, who synthesizes the properties of his prototypes, while grafting onto them those quintessential 19th century emotions of *Sehnsucht* (longing), *Heimweh* (homesickness), and *Weltschmerz* (world weariness). Infusing the journey with a new psychological dimension, the 19th century Wanderer marches into 20th with the epic journeys of Joyce's Ulysses, Hemingway's rootless heroes, or Salinger's adolescent outsider in *Catcher in the Rye*.

Drawn from his Classical studies, his linguistic proficiency, his appreciation of music, music theatre, and visual art, as well as from his own Wanderlust, Müller's points of reference for the wanderer-quest theme were extensive. But of the entire kaleidoscope of contexts it was the 19th century English and German Romantic traditions that held for him the most fertile soil in which to create *Die Winterreise*. Among the English Romantics in whom Müller was deeply versed, there stand out several major antecedents in the works of William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe and Mary Shelley, and Lord Byron. From Blake's mystic poetry comes the notion of a divided human psyche the Spectre journeying through life in search of its shadow, the Emanation, reunion with which brings wholeness and creative voice. In Coleridge's 1797 allegory, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, there are several prototypes for Müller's winter's journey: Coleridge's Mariner is condemned

to expiate his sin of killing the innocent albatross by wandering the globe, recounting his horrific tale of his polar journey into the icy regions of nihilism and the burning fires of hellish guilt to the waters of baptism and the blessing of life. The Mariner's physical landscape is strikingly close to Müller's, just as his poetic mindscape parallels the existential experiences of *Die Winterreise's* Wanderer. Mary Shelley's 1818 *Frankenstein* offers an astounding number of similarities: the split personality protagonist – the scientist Victor Frankenstein, whose hubris tempts him to play god and fashion a living creature who becomes his demonic Doppelgänger and ultimately his nemesis; the imagery of the Victor's mad pursuit of the monster through ice and snow to a polar death on Walton's ship where the creature comes to mourn, to melt the ice with his hot tears and to immolate himself on a raft of ice which plunges into the frozen waters. Parallels between Frankenstein and the Müller-Schubert Wanderer are striking. Both are Faustian questers, misunderstood and neglected promethean poet-creators, whose vain thirst for the absolute brings with it immeasurable suffering. In titling her novel "The Modern Prometheus," Mary was referencing her husband Shelley's own epic verse drama, *Prometheus Unbound* which addresses in a far more idealistic vein the same issues of the poet in chains who suffers unspeakable agony until his soul can be integrated into the larger human one; for Shelley this transformation comes through the spirit of love and compassion. Among P.B. Shelley's other writings which treat the Wanderer theme is the early *Alastor* in which the half-human, half-spirit protagonist journeys through the frost and thaw in search of self and meaning and his early treatise on atheism which espouses the Feuerbachian declaration found in Müller's poem, "Mut" – that since the gods have deserted the earth, men must themselves become gods.

And finally there are the two great journey poems of Byron, Müller's idol, In the first, "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage," a young rebel-outcast leaves his homeland, journeying throughout Europe, confronting history experientially, attaining the visionary realm where his identity as a poet – who remains a professional wanderer – is at last secure. In the second, "Don Juan," the pessimism that was to echo forcibly through Byron's German counterparts is tempered by a brilliant satiric wit. And between these stands the verse drama "Manfred," where its half-mad hero contemplates plunging from the icy peaks of the Jungfrau before resolving "not to slumber, not to die" but rather to journey on.

All these works surely spoke to Müller as did the writings of his great German predecessors and contemporaries. He echoed Goethe's reverence for the resources of the German folk tradition, among them the seminal collection *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. He immersed himself in the *Bildersprache*, the colorful, symbolic, imagistic language of the Romantics, and he shared with poets like Eichendorff, Chamisso, Uhland, Lenau, and Rückert a reverence for nature and a spirit of rebellious adventure. The younger poet Heine claimed that it was Müller who had awakened him to "pure tone and true simplicity." For Müller, as with Heine, poems were conceived to be sung. Müller wrote in his diary in 1815, "I can neither play nor sing, yet when I write verses, I sing and play after all. If I could produce the melodies, my songs would be more pleasing than they are now. But courage! perhaps there is a kindred spirit somewhere who will hear the tunes behind the words and give them back to me."

That kindred spirit proved to be Franz Schubert, who set not only *Winterreise* (he removed the article from the title) but also the earlier cycle, *Die schöne Müllerin*. It seems likely that Schubert discovered Müller's poems in the library of his roommate, Franz von Schober, sometime in the late fall or winter of 1826. Müller had published the poems in stages, the first twelve in *Urania: Taschenbuch auf das Jahr 1823*, ten more later in 1823 in the *Deutsche Blätter für Poesie und Litteratur, Kunst, und Theatre*, and finally in 1824 all twenty-four poems (adding "Die Post" and "Täuschung" to the former) and reordering their format in *Waldhornisten II*. In reconstructing the musical genesis of the cycle, Schubert scholar Susan Youens asserts that Schubert was not aware of the existence of Müller's final twenty-four text version when he began to set the poems, and "when he did discover the extended Müller opus, it must have been clear to him he could not duplicate Müller's final ordering without disrupting the musical structure he had already created." Thus he simply set the remaining poems in order beginning with "Die Post" (with one slight reversal of "Mut" and "Die Nebensonnen"), and the publication of the cycle which was already underway proceeded with the issuing of Part I in January 1828 and Part II some eleven months later in December of the same year, less than one month after Schubert's death on November 19, 1828. Given the irony that *Winterreise* figures among the composer's last works and given its death-bent theme, there is a tendency to read the cycle in autobiographical terms, when, in reality, its greatness lies in the fact that it is not about either Müller or Schubert personally, but rather about the articulation of a powerful

psychological and metaphorical monodrama. In musico-poetic language whose roots like in German folklore and in the language of Beethoven and Goethe, Schubert's twenty-four songs exist on several levels of meaning. On the most literal and least consequential, they recount the flight from his native village of a man, disappointed in love and his relentless wandering through a winter landscape. The narrative inconsistencies, however, bespeak a journey motivated by inner time – a symbolic series of stations that are more mindscape than landscape. More than anything, *Winterreise* is a dream vision, the Wanderer's journey through mind and heart into the depths of the soul.

First and foremost, *Winterreise* is metaphor; the action takes place within the human psyche; the Wanderer transcends the Self using Nature's elements as symbols of inner truths. The cycle begins and ends in winter, though the shades of white – that hue composed of all colors and lights – reveal an infinite variety of images. There are the ice and snow, which symbolize the death of the heart, the frozen paralysis into which loss of love has plunged the Wanderer. The chill torpor which freezes memory ironically protects against its loss; the ice which forms a hard crust into which the wanderer can engrave an epitaph, masks the seething torrents of emotion beneath. Alternately the wintry blasts seduce into numbness (as before the linden tree) and then thrust the Wanderer forward pitted against wind and weather until he declares with bravado in the third from last song of the cycle, "Mut," that even if the snow flies in his face he will sing brightly and boldly. In what Dr. Youens has rightly called a desperate Promethean gesture, the Wanderer begins to find his voice once more. Echoing Feuerbach, Byron, and the two Shelleys, to the tempi of a drinking song, he hurls his liberating credo: "If God forsakes the earth/Then we ourselves are Gods!"

The contraries of ice – water and fire – play powerful roles in the cycle as well. Tears both freeze and pierce the snowy crust; snows thaw and merge into flood waters to flow back into memory, carrying with them the unextinguished wellsprings of emotion. From the apocalyptic vision of red flames on a wintry morning in "Der stürmische Morgen" to the dancing lights of the illusory will-o-wisps in "Irrlicht" to the comforting delusion of the flickering lights that signal a warm house and a loving soul in "Täuschung," firelight offers the dynamic counterbalance to ice; Oxymoron that these elements are, their interaction brings a Blakean energy to the cycle. Perhaps the most riveting use of the fire imagery in the

penultimate song, "Die Nebensonnen," where the Wanderer is mocked by three suns. The symbolism of the suns has many interpretations from the representation of faith, hope, and love to the burning of suns through misty skies and therefore perhaps even through misty eyes, and, of course, to a belief that two of the three suns are, in fact, the eyes of his lost beloved. Whatever the symbolism, it would seem that the eventual merging of these fiery suns must melt into a One that offers relief to the Wanderer for his schizophrenic state. These images (accompanied by the fearlessness of the melody) are, in and of themselves, searing depictions of the Wanderer's battle with inner darkness.

Colors and seasons are juxtaposed as well. White is contrasted to green – "Der Lindenbaum" of sweet memory transformed into a frost covered siren of death; the tracery of icy leaf patterns on the window pane recalling the greener leaves of spring, or the funeral wreaths of the graveyard imagined to be the *heurige* garlands of an inn. Black sets off white in the startling revelation of "Der greise Kopf" or in the ominous image of "Die Krähe," which, like Coleridge's albatross or Keats' nightingale whose song reminds the poet he is "half in love with easeful death," the crow becomes the Wanderer's companion to whom he ironically utters the marriage vows, "Treue bis zum Grabe." Autumn is conjured up as a halfway-house between Summer and Winter, life and death, as the Wanderer poses in the sixteenth song, "Letzte Hoffnung," the question which echoes Shelley's in "Ode to the West Wind:" whether Winter is an end in itself or a prefiguring of Spring? Throughout *Winterreise*, as in all of Romantic literature, Nature holds a mirror to Man. Not only do natural images become the vocabulary of the *Bildersprache*, the pictorial language of psychological thought, but Nature's rhythms reflect human tempi. In the Schubert-Müller cycle time is set to an eternal clock. It is difficult to make sense of the winter's journey in real hours because more than action, the events of *Winterreise* are dreams, hallucinations, flights of madness and waystations of sanity as the Wanderer struggles to find his equilibrium. Time stops and starts and stands still—sometimes sequentially, sometimes simultaneously as reality and fantasy diverge. At various stages it reaches a crossroads of hesitation ("Rückblick" where the Wanderer entertains the illusion of standing once more before his beloved's house) or decision ("Der Wegweiser" where he courageously determines to take the road "from which none has returned").

Just as time is metaphorical, so, too, is movement. All that which voice and piano

conjure as a feeling of walking is inextricably linked to the ebb and flow of the human heartbeat in its excitement and depression. Both musical and metaphysical progressions are manifestations of the psychological journey. The musical heart beat is found in the interaction between piano and voice as well as in the rich variations of tempi which range from the breathlessness of “Der stürmische Morgen” and the galloping of “Die Post” to the languid aimlessness of “Einsamkeit” and the elegiac majesty of “Wasserflut” and “Das Wirtshaus.”

The metaphysical voyage is one toward reintegration; yet the stages of the journey are fraught with contraries. Throughout, the piano is the propelling force, a metaphor for the journey, itself, with its walking, pausing, hesitating, and finally finding an existential drone in the Leiermann’s *cri de coeur* – a tune that is resolving rather than relieving. Piano and voice, like the two selves of the Wanderer, enter into dialogue, the vocal line often declamatory, sometimes interspersed with lyrical folk-like melodies or dance rhythms. The soul simultaneously strives with and yearns for its Doppelgänger; the life force resists the death wish; the Wanderer who longs for rest/stasis gives himself up to everlasting flux. Perhaps the most shattering manifestation of the protagonist’s split personality occurs in the fourteenth song, “Der greise Kopf,” where he imagines that the snow covering his hair is the whiteness of age and approaching death, only to be shocked back to the reality of his dark locks. It is at this moment that the Wanderer’s insanity asserts itself with terrifying force. He stares into the mirror at the image of his other half; he desires to be that Doppelgänger who is done with life as he realizes with horror his own survival instinct will not permit him to enter the looking glass.

A long and bitter road still lies before him after this climactic epiphany. It leads through nocturnal nightmares to the abjuration of dreams (“Im Dorfe”), to the admission that illusion can embody the reawakening powers of the imagination (“Täuschung”), to the crossroads of “Der Wegweiser,” where, like Byron’s Manfred, the Wanderer questions why his footsteps diverge from those of other men—why fate has marked him for everlasting loneliness and voyaging. The road, he realizes, ultimately ends in death, but, now it is not the outcome, but rather, the process, which takes on supreme meaning. In his increasing acceptance of destiny and his rebellious, even fearless confrontation with the dark unknown, the Wanderer is granted the final revelation of his journey.

In “Der Leiermann,” the winter traveler again encounters the image of his

Doppelgänger, but this time the confrontation has little of the schizophrenia of the meeting in “Der greise Kopf.” Like the specter of the suns, which have accompanied him unacknowledged and invisible, the barefoot organ grinder who plays with numb fingers his relentless hurdy-gurdy tune suddenly springs into the Wanderer’s sight and consciousness. The tonal shift from major to minor and the repetitive snatch of folk melody which short circuits and resumes signal the Wanderer’s embrace of fate. In the grim vision of the old beggar musician, the Wanderer finally accosts his alter-ego. They are equal poets of converging paths whose now creative journey promises a long winter of suffering.

The cycle ends with a kind of unanswered question to which the reply is an existential given. As the Wanderer reintegrated with his alter-ego Leiermann asks, “Whither next the journey? Who my partner? What the songs?”, another archetypal Romantic image springs to mind – that of Caspar David Friedrich’s famous painting of *The Wanderer*, in dark frock coat, back to the world, atop the Alpine peak staring off into the limitless horizon. Like the painted image, Schubert’s Wanderer-Minstrel is confronted by another white expanse far more daunting than ice or snow: the blank page on which to write one’s future.