

Wilfried Steiner's *Der Weg nach Xanadu* – an Austrian Campus Novel?

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on Wilfried Steiner's 2003 novel *Der Weg nach Xanadu* / *The Way To Xanadu* which appears to be an Austrian campus novel owing to the setting of the Austrian world of academia in its first part. Owing to its lack of local coloring, however, the Vienna-based plot of the first part does not feature a (stereo)typically 'Austrian' genius loci. Although this part of the text echoes features of the international campus novel tradition, it may be definitely not considered an Austrian campus novel. The second part of the novel is set in the Lake District, focuses on Coleridge's Romantic poetry and the Doppelgänger-motif. Whereas the first part may be vaguely contextualized within the international campus novel tradition, the second part is deeply imbued with the Romantic tradition of the Künstlerroman or artist's novel.

Keywords: Wilfried Steiner, *Der Weg nach Xanadu*, Austria, Campus Novel, English Romanticism, Künstlerroman, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Kubla Khan", The White Goddess

When Wilfried Steiner's *Der Weg nach Xanadu / The Way to Xanadu* (my translation) appeared in 2003, Sebastian Domsch published a review which claimed that this work is "an Austrian campus novel and much more" (Domsch, my translation). As will be shown in this article, Steiner's book, is much more than a campus novel indeed, and this aspect may be attributed to the work's bipartite structure: whereas the first part may be contextualized within the campus novel tradition of the second half of the twentieth century, the second part is deeply imbued with the tradition of the *Künstlerroman* or artist's novel which flourished in the Romantic period and focuses on an (often overreaching) artist in quest of artistic genius and perfection. Owing to the fact that there is no Austria-related local colouring at all, however, it will be argued that Wilfried Steiner's *The Way to Xanadu* may be definitely not considered an 'Austrian' campus novel: although the protagonist is introduced as a professor from the University of Vienna, the Austrian world of academia is not represented at all.

PART I

The main character of *The Way to Xanadu* is the obese middle-aged Vienna University Professor Alexander Markowitsch. Being a loner and a lifelong bachelor, his *joie de vivre* is restricted to wine, food and Romantic poetry, which is his main field of academic and personal interest. Markowitsch is fascinated by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who wrote his most famous works within the very short time span of a single year – his poetic *annus mirabilis* 1797 –, after which his talent became stale and his physical and mental condition deteriorated. One of the works produced in this year is the famous "Kubla Khan"-fragment alluded to by the novel's title *The Way to Xanadu*:

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea. [...]
(Coleridge 1-5)

Markowitsch is convinced that Coleridge's visionary year of exceptional genius must have been triggered off by something even more significant than the commonly affirmed circumstance of the poet's falling in (unfortunate) love with Sara Hutchinson.

The novel begins when Martin – a young doctoral student – enters Markowitsch's study and asks him to supervise his PhD thesis project on Coleridge. Being

annoyed by the young man's upstart zeal and enthusiasm, the rather phlegmatic and disillusioned Professor tries to get rid of his new disciple. Then something unexpected happens: the door opens, and Martin's girl-friend Anna enters the study. Markowitsch looks at the beautiful charismatic young woman, falls in love at first sight, and his life is about to change for good. He accepts to supervise Martin's work to establish contact with Anna. In the months to follow, Markowitsch, Anna and Martin meet in bars and restaurants on a regular basis, and it is at this stage that the Professor's colleagues spread the rumour that there must be something fishy about Markowitsch's private company of the young man and woman. From this moment on, the Professor becomes an increasingly nervous and irate person, and even the very few friends he has let him down. Like the lovesick Coleridge haunted by alcohol- and drug-induced visions, Markowitsch is tortured by nightmares and loses his awareness of reality. In a somewhat schizophrenic manner, the borderline between fact and fiction becomes increasingly blurred.¹

As observed by Domsch, the tale of the physically unattractive and socially isolated teacher falling in love with a good-looking vamp-like young woman may be considered a rewriting of Heinrich Mann's *Professor Unrat* (*Small Town Tyrant*) – a German prototype of campus fiction² which appeared in 1905 and was adapted into the movie *The Blue Angel* (starring the young Marlene Dietrich) in 1930. Anna is not featured as a vulgar, or fallen woman such as the ill-reputed young temptress presented in Heinrich Mann's novel, however. Rather than that, she is fashioned as a sort of Muse-like oracular prophetess, as there are hints that Anna knows things about the Professor which cannot be explained by way of novelistic realism. This is, for instance, the case when she takes two books from one of his chairs and places them in the correct position of the correct shelf of his personal library although she has never been in the Professor's study before (31). Things such as these suggest that the love story, which is about to emerge, cannot be compared with the often shallow affairs between old university teachers and their good-looking but often not really intelligent young students satirized in the traditional campus novel.

The episode with the book shows that Anna is a very cultured and sophisticated person who seduces the Professor by way of textual rather than sexual intercourse. To be more precise, she makes Markowitsch fall in love with her via an intertextual re-enactment of two of the most famous text-induced love-scenes in the Western literary canon. When Anna puts the books into the correct shelves, she demonstrates that she shares the Professor's textual and contextual knowledge, and thus the bookish text becomes a code of mutual empathy and

1 Trombik (181-4) attributes this aspect to the metafictional self-referentiality of the novel.

2 See Fuchs 2016.

intimacy – an aspect which is emphasized by Markowitsch’s ardent desire to browse Anna’s bookshelf when he is invited to her flat for the first time (79). Although the common reader does not get to know the titles of the two books, the literary connoisseur knows that such a matchmaking by way of textual intercourse is foregrounded in Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.³

The scene described above echoes Goethe’s 1774 epistolary *Sturm und Drang* novel where Werther and Lotte fall in love when they contemplate nature and independently associate one and the same poem with this vision: Klopstock’s “Thunderstorm Ode”. When Lotte utters the poet’s name “Klopstock”, the enraptured Werther realizes that they share the same intimate thoughts and feelings and thus emphatically understand each other via the code of poetry. Their love triggered off by the poetic word is philology at its best, as the ancient Greek term ‘philology’ may be translated as ‘love of the word’ in the deeper sense of *logos*, which not only means ‘word’ but also ‘thought’, ‘wisdom’, ‘truth’, the principle of divine order regulating the world of the mortals, and much more.

To fully appreciate Anna’s philological sophistication, the reader has to bear in mind that Goethe rewrote this scene from Dante’s already mentioned *Divine Comedy* which features the unfortunate lovers Paolo and Francesca da Rimini (*Inferno* V,127-38): reading the naughty tale of Sir Launcelot – who commits adultery with the wife of his feudal lord and master – in each other’s company, Francesca and Paolo’s act of communal reading – or textual intercourse – stimulates sexual intercourse and bodily penetration. In contrast to the a-sexual enactment of sentimental love by Lotte and Werther, Dante’s story of Paolo and Francesca presents the bookish text as a bawd-like sexual matchmaker. Owing to the circumstance that Werther becomes desperate and shoots himself⁴, and Francesca and Paolo are killed by Francesca’s vengeful husband and suffer eternal punishment in hell⁵, however, Anna’s (inter)textual intercourse is presented in a highly ambivalent light: like Werther and Paolo, Alexander Markowitsch might have to die and even go to hell if he gives in to Anna’s textual seduction.

3 See Kittler.

4 Orthodox Christian doctrine attributes suicide to the sin of despair. Among all other vices, this is the only sin which cannot be forgiven and thus results in inevitable and irretrievable punishment in hell.

5 Owing to their extra-marital affair, Paolo and Francesca are killed by Francesca’s husband by way of revenge. When they tell their story to the speaker of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, they are trapped in the second circle of hell. In contrast to desperate suicidals such as Werther – who are to be found in the seventh infernal circle –, Paolo and Francesca find some consolation in the circumstance that, although they suffer infernal punishment, they will remain in each other’s company and enjoy immortal love forever.

As can be seen from this key-episode, the *Small Town Tyrant* pattern as a German prototype of campus fiction introduced at the outset is thus about to give way to an enigmatic story of passionate love inflamed by a vamp-like *belle dame sans merci* known from romantic art. This observation ties in with the fact that, throughout the first part of *The Way to Xanadu*, the features of campus fiction are applied as a very general framing devices rather than generic markers – an aspect which can be, first of all, observed from the fact that the plot of Steiner's novel is not situated on a University campus and does not present or reflect campus-life at all. Although the University of Vienna is one of the few continental universities which boasts of a really nice campus, the Vienna University Campus is not mentioned at all. And, apart from a few street names and places, the novel does not offer any local colouring: no typically Viennese coffee houses, no morbid *genius loci*, no Third Mann-style underworld, no Freudian or Wittgensteinian academic debates, no Beethoven or Schubert etc. Although the author Wilfried Steiner is an Austrian graduate of English studies and thus knows the Austrian world of academia, Austrian university life is entirely excluded from his text. This is especially true for the fact that – although the Vienna Institute of English and American Studies offered many quirky characters at the time the novel was written –, there are no topical or satirical references to any of them. The same is true of the University of Salzburg where Steiner received his M.A. and Ph.D. Although the Salzburg institute offered at least as many eccentric staff members as the Vienna Department of English and American Studies at that time – and although parts of the plot of the novel are set in Salzburg – there is no local colouring either. Apart from place names such as 'Vienna' and 'Salzburg', the novel's setting could be literally any place in the Western world. Hence, *The Way to Xanadu* may be definitely not considered an *Austrian* prototype of campus fiction inspired by the German *Small Town Tyrant* tradition, as mentioned in the review quoted at the outset.

PART II

The lack of local colouring in the first part is even more astounding if one considers the circumstance that the second part of the novel contains local colouring in abundance. This part is set in Coleridge's world of the Romantic poets: the Lake District in Northern England.

As already mentioned, the passionate love Markowitsch feels for Anna results in an identity crisis and Coleridge-like visions and nightmares of self-alienation. Again the keyword 'schizophrenia' comes to the reader's mind; or to mention a literary device more appropriate for the study of Romanticism, the motif of the

Doppelgänger. Thus the second part of Steiner's book presents the love-sick Professor Markowitsch as a modern counterpart of Coleridge. A first intertextual key to this aspect can be found in Coleridge's "Kubla Khan"-fragment alluded to in the novel's title *The Way to Xanadu*.

It is universally acknowledged that the composition of Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" was triggered off by a dream vision which somewhat coincides with a later found description of the Kubla Khan Palace in an Oriental writing the romantic poet could not have known when he composed his fragmentary poem. As Markowitsch has a recurring vision of an unknown study allegedly used by Coleridge – and as an Anna-like temptress recurs in his nightmarish dreams over and over again –, he finally sets out on a quest-like journey in search of an empirical counterpart of this enigmatic vision. Thus he hopes to be not only cured from the psychological stress symptoms he suffers from as Coleridge's *Doppelgänger*, he also hopes to find an explanation of the enigma the allegedly omniscient and omnipresent Anna represents in his life. In other words, the expert in Romanticism tries to find an *organon*- or synthesis-like overall explanation of his yet fragmentary vision, and this even more so, as he unsuccessfully tried to become a poet in his younger days. As recommended by Coleridge's friend Wordsworth, Markowitsch tries to find a poetic solution to his personal dilemma by 'recollecting the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings [triggered off by Anna] in tranquillity.'⁶ Maybe the middle-aged, *ennui*-ridden Professor has the potential become another Coleridge-like artistic genius – and thus Coleridge's *Doppelgänger* in a quite literary sense – after all? But this would also imply a re-enactment of Coleridge's final, Satan-like, downfall as an over-reaching Romantic genius at the end of the novel.

To cut the very long episodic second part of *The Way to Xanadu* short, Markowitsch succeeds in finding the place he saw in his dream visions over and over again: an undiscovered study used by Coleridge, which even contains the copy of a volume of the poet's source material with some handwritten annotations. This philological sensation would boost the Professor's career towards world-renowned academic scholarship, and Alexander Markowitsch would become an international authority in the field of Romantic Studies. A Viennese counterpart or *Doppelgänger* of M.H. Abrams, so to speak.

Markowitsch, however, is much more interested in an esoteric place of divine worship which he finds not far away from Coleridge's undiscovered study: an old chapel which turns out to be built on a pagan place of worship of the White Goddess, as elucidated in Robert Graves' 1948 study published under the same title. According to Graves, the White Goddess chooses a mortal man to live with every

6 See Wordsworth & Coleridge, Preface to Lyrical Ballads (168).

year: for a year, this mortal experiences paradisiacal bliss including sexual fulfilment and poetic inspiration; after the end of this period, however, he will be killed and sent into the underworld. When Markowitsch approaches this archaic place of worship, Anna appears, identifies herself as the White Goddess and offers him a Doctor Faustus-like pact of a blissful year in paradise on earth, as it is mentioned in the two concluding lines of Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* fragment alluded to in the title of Steiner's *The Way to Xanadu*:

For he on honeydew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.
(Coleridge 33-34)

At the very end of the novel the sexually and intellectually burnt-out Professor and amateur poet is likely to enter the contract. At this stage it comes as no surprise that the White Goddess Anna explains that she offered the same arrangement to Coleridge who produced his major works within the already mentioned one-year period known as his *annus mirabilis*. Hence Professor Markowitsch and Samuel Taylor Coleridge are not only featured in terms of Romantic *Doppelgänger*s but, first of all, as Faustian overreachers whose souls are bound by a contract with an otherworldly tempting figure. Steiner's novel thus cultivates a character type which may be traced back to Christopher Marlowe's Doctor Faustus fashioned in the early modern era, which recurs in the Satan-figure of Milton's *Paradise Lost* in the second half of the seventeenth century, and which is fused with the overreaching figure of the Byronic Hero in the Romantic period.

What seems to begin like a Campus Novel in the first part, thus turns out to be a *Künstlerroman* which focuses on an overreaching artistic genius and reflects the tradition of the Marlovian overreacher, Milton's Satanic rebel and the Byronic Hero on a meta-level. Hence *The Way to Xanadu* seems to be not so much inspired by Heinrich Mann's *Small Town Tyrant* as the foundational text of the German and Austrian tradition of the Campus Novel. As the second part shows, *The Way to Xanadu* turns out to be a rewriting of the Romantic tradition of the artist's novel which culminates in Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus* – a twentieth century text which fuses the Faustian myth of the overreacher with the Romantic cult of absolute art.

CONCLUSION

Like the romantic genius Samuel Taylor Coleridge at the beginning of his artistic *annus mirabilis*, the amateur poet Alexander Markowitsch seems to be doomed to surrender to the perverted Muse's kiss offered by the *femme fatale*-like Anna when

The Way to Xanadu approaches its end. The Muse the Professor meets as a *poeta vates*-like visionary thus turns out to be a demonic emissary from the Underworld rather than a truly inspiring emissary from Mount Parnassus. She charms her victims by a *furor-poeticus*-like spell triggering off genius-like artistic composition which, however, turns out to be self-destructive at the end.

In her offer of a perverted Muse's kiss, the White Goddess Anna resembles the archetypal seductress of Western culture featured in Christopher Marlowe's seminal treatment of human overreaching in *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*. In Marlowe's early modern play, the Professor Markowitsch-like Doctor Faustus is tricked into losing his soul by the demonic spirit of Helen of Troy whom the devilish Mephistopheles conjures from Hades: the white(!)-armed⁷ seductress, who vampire-like 'sucks' or swallows Faustus's soul by way of a kiss very similar to the one offered by the White Goddess Anna. These are the famous lines articulated by the Marlovian overreacher Doctor Faustus on this occasion:

Was this the face that launched a thousand ships
 And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?
 Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss.
 [Kisses her]
 Her lips suck forth my soul – see where it flies!
 Come, Helen, come, give me my soul again.
 Here will I dwell, for heaven is in these lips
 And all is dross that is not Helena.
 I will be Paris, and for love of thee
 Instead of Troy, shall Wittenberg be sacked,
 And I will combat with weak Menelaus,
 And wear thy colours on my plumed crest;
 Yea, I will wound Achilles in the heel
 And then return to Helen for a kiss.
 (Marlowe 1986: 859: 5.1.98-110)

Wilfried Steiner's *The Way to Xanadu* ends as a self-reflexive⁸ *Künstlerroman* or artist's novel – and thus turns out to be not without artistic merit. As has been shown, however, the two rather isolated parts of the novel do not really connect into an organic whole: a unified and universal piece of art which corresponds with the Romantic ideal of an *organon*-like or Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

This "deep romantic chasm" (Coleridge 12) – which splits the work into two rather loosely connected parts – may be not so much attributed to the fact that

7 In the Homeric Iliad Helen is referred to as "white-armed" (III; 121). Most frequently, however, this description is attributed to Hera.

8 See Trombik (180-4).

the mode of the Campus Novel vaguely echoed in the first part is transformed into the mode of the artist's novel in the second part. This turns out to be a rather original artistic device.

It may be, however, attributed to the novel's conflicting composition of place: the Austrian world of academia presented as a (non-)place without local colouring opposed to the fully fleshed-out English world of the Lake Poets described in great circumstantial detail – a contrast, which is not motivated by the structural or aesthetic design of the text and thus must be considered an artistic deficit.

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***Der Weg nach Xanadu* Wilfrieda Steinerja – avstrijski kampus roman?**

Članek se osredinja na roman *Der Weg nach Xanadu* (2003), ki se na prvi pogled zdi avstrijski primer kampus romana glede na dunajsko lokacijo dogajanja. Kljub temu pa nima ustrezne lokalne obarvanosti in zato ne predstavlja stereotipnega duha kraja in je bolj prepojen z romantično tradicijo romana o umetniku.

Ključne besede: Wilfried Steiner, *Der Weg nach Xanadu*, Avstrija, kampus roman, angleška romantika, Künstlerroman, Samuel Taylor Coleridge