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Carmen studiosi vagantis

(a section of the Farm Hall paper in progress)

Summary

It is argued that the apparently light-hearted Trinklied performed at the Farm Hall celebration party for Otto Hahn's Nobel prize in November 1945¹, actually celebrates the "Lesart"² and the Farm Hall legend by sophisticated associations and connotations, using irony, sarcasm and derision, surely recognized by the detainees.

Background

On the very first page of Jeremy Bernstein's annotated Farm Hall Transcripts³ - preceding the title page and the impressum - the reader is confronted with the Trinklied that was conceived for the rather wet celebration of Hahn's Nobel Prize, held by the detainees on 16 November 1945. Bernstein also includes the entire text in the context of the full account of the celebration⁴. It thus is given a higher visibility than any other single instance in the Farm Hall material, and yet, although Bernstein comments on virtually all aspects of the Transcripts and their background, he leaves the Trinklied without a single note. Was it his intention to leave it to the discretion and imagination of the reader to disentangle the meaning of the stanzas, some of which are indeed trivial while others are quite enigmatic? *I will argue in this section of the paper that the Trinklied describes in a nutshell the mental state that bore the "Lesart"*.

The Trinklied is a paraphrase on the well-known German student drinking song, "*Carmen studiosi vagantis*", with music attributed to Carl Maria von Weber.⁵ In the Farm Hall version, the performance was arranged like a liturgical responsorium, with two lines of versicle (sung by the authors Kurt Diebner and Karl Wirtz, possibly alternating), followed by the response (a fixed 2-line refrain sung by all participants). The allusions in each versicle must have been penned so as to be understood immediately within the Farm Hall lore. Even those which a later reader finds enigmatic must have appeared evident, topically relevant, and amusingly twisted.⁶

¹ Hahn was not allowed to leave Farm Hall to participate in the Stockholm festivities in December 1945.

² "Lesart" (German for "reading", i.e. a way of interpreting a text) was introduced in a 1959 letter by Max v. Laue to characterize (possibly ironically) the description of the German uranium project in a Memorandum that had been conceived in the days after Hiroshima by the Farm Hall detainees (Bernstein 2001 p. 147-150, Rechenberg 1994, pp. 48-57).

³ Bernstein 2001: Hitler's Uranium Club – the secret recordings at Farm Hall. (New York: Copernicus/Springer 2001, 1st ed. 1996). The full text of the reports from Farm Hall, including the "Transcripts" first appeared in (Frank 1993)

⁴ Bernstein 2001, p. 286-301.

⁵ It is referred to as "das Urbummellied" (Bummel = dawdler and drunkard// försupen dōnicke). The first two stanzas read: *Studens in itinere/Novit bene vivere//Semper per diversa it/Laetus vitam peragit*, which in its nicely rhymed German form reads: "Studio auf einer Reis'/Ganz famos zu leben weiss//Immer fort durch dick und dünn/ schlendert er durch's Dasein hin", every two lines being followed by "Juchheidi, heidi, heida/ Juchheidi, heida!"

⁶ It is not obvious how the erratic meter of the Farm Hall poem was forced onto the music.

There were several contributions to the evening's entertainment. Naturally Hahn's priority in the discovery of nuclear fission is in focus at the celebration party. Throughout, the Nobel Prize, implicitly, is interpreted not only as recognition of path-breaking research, but also inversely - with a false syllogism - as proof of the righteous claim of credit for a single scientist's efforts. With one exception, the contributions to the entertainment were held in a bantering, ironic style.⁷ The exception was Max v. Laue's standard academic panegyric, where not a word is said about the teamwork that led to the fission discovery.

A reading of the Farm Hall Trinklied in the light of the "Farm Hall Transcripts"

(The Trinklied is reproduced in its entirety as Appendix)

The first two verses (v1-v2) state that it was participation in the German uranium project that was the reason for the scientists' detention: the project was of course made possible by Hahn's discovery (the refrain). But (v3) it was the Allies who had used the German discovery for military applications, mistakenly assuming that the Germans had launched their own nuclear weapons program, an assumption that was both unjustified and absurd (*Wunderlich*, v.4) as the Germans had never even thought about the bomb. Of course the bomb was made possible by Hahn's discovery, a fact known by everybody (v.5: *military, politicians, down to newspaper boys*). But it would be ludicrous to claim that Hahn in any way was responsible for the abuse of his discovery.⁸

A diversion (v.6) might relate to some advertisement seen in a journal, possibly for a "maison de joie". At the time, all sorts of things were given an epithet of "atomic".

The Allies triumphantly claim that they have won the life-and-death race for nuclear weapons (v.7). The Allied success was taken by some ignoramuses (S. Goudsmit ?) to imply that German research had not really solved fundamental problems. In reality there had been no race at all – the German research teams had of course understood the physics, but had focused on basic research and peaceful applications for the benefit of mankind. The refrain could, in the context, be read to mean that the detainees has turned down the German military request for a bomb project, as was in fact claimed both at Farm Hall and later.

It cannot be said too often: Otto Hahn's discovery of fission implied a sea-change in world politics (v.8). But while the detainees deplored the military applications, and obstructed requests for a German nuclear weapons program, the Allies without second thoughts developed an unprecedented means of destruction and disaster. We were made victims, our misfortune as detainees derives from the distrust of the Allies in our heroic resistance to the Nazi regime. Hahn is to blame (indirectly) in this ludicrous sense only.

⁷ The esprit of the famous "Copenhagen Faust" (Mayenn 1985) presented at the 1932 Spring Meeting in Bohr's Institute, where Heisenberg and Weizsäcker had been involved, was not attained.

⁸ A faked news report (presented as cut from the "Sunday Pictorial"), read by WH, referred to Hahn as "Hitler's atom expert", to be perceived as a hilarious joke, as everybody knew that he had characterized himself as a "fanatic anti-Nazi" (Bernstein 2001, p. 288).

No comment on v. 9, which is just a silly rhyme.

Germany receives a Nobel Prize (v.10). This is deeper than the naïve concept (an analogue from the sports world) that a laureate wins a prize for the country where he/she is citizen. Hahn's claim as single discoverer had been a permanent concern at Farm Hall – it was reiterated some forty times - and surely right from the announcement in January 1939 to the scientific world. Yet the case was controversial and several interpretations were available to the Royal Swedish Academy of Science. The weight of the opinions of Bohr, Einstein, Chadwick, Franck and others (who might make a case for Meitner's contributions) was not negligible. And the symbolic value of a shared prize for the internationalism of Science, reintegrating German science into the science community at large would have been obvious. Only once the prize was announced, a "patriotic" interpretation was marketable outside Germany: any doubts about Hahn's priority claims could be swept aside and the prize could also be taken to confirm the rehabilitation of the German science community, its apolitical devotion to the pursuit of knowledge, and clearance of any accusation of subservience to the Nazi regime, even the indebtedness of the world to German research. Although Hahn was already *de facto* selected as president of the KWG, the Prize imparted further authority, confirming the foresight of the Allies and the German electorate. Among German scientists it was understood that he should – and would - pursue the culture of impunity.⁹

Now the justification of Hahn's claim being apparently settled unassailably, it was time to "settle accounts". The following two stanzas (v. 11-12) which surely were conceived to be understood and appreciated by the Farm Hall group, seem enigmatic to a later reader. It is the present author's belief that they must be read as important tokens of the general spirit of self-complacency that characterizes the ambiance of the evening, as it has come down to us in the Farm Hall files.

"In Oxford Street...." (v.11). The "Tränen" can hardly be anything but tears of envy or anger. They are shed by a woman ("die wird ..."). Knowing the extreme concern and efforts of Hahn and the others to cut Lise Meitner out of the history of nuclear fission, and by default of any other possible candidate, it seems inevitable to assume that the text is a sneer at Meitner. She had, in the Farm Hall view, tried to infringe on Hahn's priority rights so to speak *post hoc*, by using his magnanimous confidential message about experimental results for a theoretical explanation. But in vain – truth and decency had prevailed in Stockholm in spite of the political situation. Why then "Oxford Street"? In occasional poetry (*Gelegenheitsdichtung*) hidden or encrypted allusions are a standard technique appealing to group "culture", here the common frame of reference of the Farm Hall detainees. Using more evident expressions like "Im Schwedenland" or "in Ultima

⁹ This is what happened in Hahn's years as President of KWG and its continuation as the Max Planck Gesellschaft, with the help of Ernst Telschow - a former student of Hahn's who, as CEO (Generalsekretär) of KWG from 1937, had managed - with ideological devotion - to combine the interests of the KWG with those of the NS-regime, and whose knowledge of persons and policies was indispensable for the cover-up of collusion (Hachtmann 2007, Sime 2006, Walker 2006)

Thule” would have seemed trite.¹⁰ Someone like Laue, who was a friend of Meitner, might have denounced the stanza as bad taste, but under the circumstances group loyalty prevailed, as it had done several months earlier, when Laue had signed the Memorandum of 8th August, which can be seen as the birth of what has been called “the myth of the German atomic bomb”¹¹. In any case, in correspondence with Lise Meitner, he had insinuated that she was intellectually dependent on Hahn.¹²

“Es fehlte damals nur ein Atom..” (v.12): This is rhythmically one of the poorest stanzas, but it has a function as complement and amplification to v.11. The atom missing was Barium, and the discovery was essentially that the chemical analysis had shown that the observed atom was indeed an isotope of Barium and not of Radium. One of the main points of the “Fission–was-discovered-by-Hahn”-incantation was that Meitner - and Physics, for that matter – had nothing to do with the fission discovery. The phrase “I marry you, madam” was of course not to be taken literally. But it would have been understood by the Farm Hall group to mean something along the lines :”If Meitner had significantly contributed to the discovery, Otto Hahn, the paragon scientist, would of course have raised her to *primus inter pares* and have acknowledged her as an equal partners in the research team. The stanza would then be another convoluted assertion of Hahn as the single discoverer. (If this reading is correct, while Meitner’s envy was entirely hypothetical, the malicious pleasure (*Schadenfreude*) of the detainees was genuine.)¹³ Indeed, Jacob Burckhardt (whose strange philosophy of history was so much venerated by some Farm Hall detainees), had proclaimed that émigrés from revolutions should not claim restitution and reappointment – they should rather keep away and accept their situation as their share of the Misery of Existence (*Erdensschicksal*), their contribution to the revolution.

Versicles 13-14: On the face of it, they form a naïve and happy finale. But in the present context they suggests another reading: The detainees have come safe and sound out of the ordeal – including the unfair internment (in violation of international law, in Hahn’s words). They have all along been “good Germans” and anti-Nazis (whatever that implies), with no complicity and no fellow traveling. The Nazi years are gone to oblivion. In any revolution atrocious events are unavoidable, but much of it was “historic necessity” and no-one is really to blame. And now back to normal!

¹⁰ In the divertissements referred to in note 8, there is a reference to “Oxford Street”: Hahn is said to work on his “Memoroiden” (autobiography) with working titel “From Oxford Street to Farm Hall”, but his London experiences are not hinted at (Bernstein 2001, p 291, 299). This reference seems to be unrelated to the Trinklied stanza.

¹¹ Walker 1995

¹² Laue to Meitner (20 Aug. 1944, Lemmerich 1998): Bitte Lise Meitner! Was ihnen fehlt, ist im Grunde doch einzig und allein die Zusammenarbeit mit Otto Hahn”. Rather unempathically, Laue adds the last two lines of a quotation from Schiller’s ”Die Braut von Messina”:

Nicht an die Güter hänge dein Herz,
die das Leben vergänglich zieren!
Wer besitzt, der lerne verlieren,
wer im Glück ist, der lerne den Schmerz!

¹³ In Dieter Hahn’s anthology (Hahn 1975), all stanzas are reproduced except #3 (ironic on allegations of a German bomb program), # 13 (irrelevant) and #11-12 (the possible Meitner allusion). Was the editor aware of the interpretaion adopted here?

Conclusion

In their isolation at Farm Hall the ten scientists, by a mental process of suppression that has been called “willed amnesia” (Sime), constructed a narrow kind of Weltanschauung focused on their moral and political impeccability in their relation to the National Socialist State, their scientific superiority, and their non-involvement with war-related research. These discussions are so frequent and dominant in the Farm Hall “transcripts”, that it is reasonable to assume that they also found an expression in the studenticose contributions to the party celebrating Hahn’s Nobel prize. This approach enables the parts of the Trinklied that have been regarded as enigmatic or even whimsical to be interpreted as (quasi)-corollaries of this constructed self-image.

The Farm Hall Nobel celebration Trinklied

- 1) Detained since more than half a year (Versicle)
Sind Hahn und wir in Farm Hall hier
Und fragt man wer ist schuld daran (Response)
So ist die Antwort Otto Hahn
- 2) The real reason nebenbei
Ist weil we worked on nuclei
.....
- 3) Die nuclei waren für den Krieg
Und für den allgemeinen Sieg
.....
- 4) Wie ist das möglich, fragt man sich
The story seems wunderlich
.....
- 5) Die Feldherrn, Staatschefs, Zeitungsknaben
Ihn everyday im Munde haben
.....
- 6) Even the sweethearts in the world(s)
Sie nennen sich jetzt “Atom-girls”
.....
- 7) Verliert man jetzt so seine Wetten
So heisst’s you didn’t split the atom
.....
- 8) Ein jeder weiss, das Unglück kam
Infolge splitting von Uran
.....
- 9) Die energy macht alles wärmer
Only die Schweden werden ärmer
.....
- 10) Auf akademisches Geheiss
Kriegt Deutschland einen Nobel-Preis
.....
- 11) In Oxford Street da lebt ein Wesen
Die wird das heut’ mit Tränen lesen
.....
- 12) Es fehlte damals nur ein atom
Hätt’ er gesagt: I marry you madam
.....
- 13) Dies ist nur unsre erste Feier

- Ich glaub die Sache wird noch teuer
.....
14) Und kommen wir aus diesem Bau
We hope, we'll be quite lucky now.

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