

European beliefs and customs as ignorance and superstition, and the conquered people begin to despise themselves. Rebekah confesses that when she was young, she had thought all nonwhite people ugly and unintelligent. In *The Story of an African Farm* (her most famous work and a classic of South-African literature), Olive Schreiner uncritically adopts the vocabulary and attitudes of her time, except that the latter is relieved by "brief spasms of impassioned charitable idealism." The Colored maid is ungrateful and vindictive, and the "Kaffir" woman has hideous lips. The broadening of awareness and sympathy in *Trooper Halket* is remarkable.

In writing about the unjust treatment of women, Olive Schreiner evidently had women of European descent in mind. She recounts that a "Kaffir" woman once told her God could not be good because he had created women (*L.* p. 144). But if it was unfortunate to be a woman, even of European origin, it was much worse to be a "Kaffir," male or female. However, Olive Schreiner gradually realized that the "real question in South Africa is the Native Question" (*L.* p. 205). This cause, she felt, would involve a long, hard battle and call to "the bravest souls in South Africa for many years to come" (*L.* p. 283). Aware of the weight of settled opinion, she at times felt a despondency on despair: "The Native Question becomes darker and darker here, and one can do nothing" (*L.* p. 323). In *An English-South African's View of the Situation* (1899) she states with terrible historical clairvoyance that within fifty to one hundred years the bill for the wrongs done to the natives will be presented for payment, and the white man would then have to settle it. In *Closer Union* (1908), she warned that a policy of racial discrimination was short-term and dangerous, and that even self-interest dictated the just treatment of the black African.

"Indifferentism" in the Early Fiction of Max Brod: The Representation of Decadence in the Prague Circle

ANGELA HABERMANN, *McGill University*

Despite a growing interest in the cultural phenomenon of decadence, the notion as a specific aesthetic quality has largely remained mystified by clichés and labels since its emergence in mid-nineteenth-century France. Decadence has yet to be accepted as a representation of social discourse, each variant changing according to its sociohistorical presuppositions. The meaning of the concept has adapted to each distinct *Zeitgeist*. This in turn caused transformations of the term and its interpretation, as well as migrations across national boundaries. Therefore, the various concepts of decadence should be considered as paradigms of communicability by which specific communities identify and justify themselves and their time. In this general context I should like to introduce the example of Max

⁷ Eric Harber, "South Africa: The White English-Speaking Sensibility," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 11, No. 1 (August 1972), p. 62.

Brod, a much neglected essayist and novelist whose early links with decadence are almost completely ignored among critics and editors.

Brod's variant of decadence represents a transformation of the original French conception of "d cadence." In the France of 1880 this notion had embodied the need for the institutionalization of an ideology for a group of artists, an ideology which was directed against bourgeois civilization and which restlessly searched for new modes of expression. Artificiality had become the dominant note for the artists in their works as well as in their life-styles. They represented a mixture of decayed Realism and exacerbated Romanticism. They turned against nineteenth-century rationalism, materialism, and moralism, as well as against the limitations of Naturalism. Although the decadent literary movement represented an important and fast-spreading phenomenon, it coexisted with various other movements, which were of prior importance especially in German-speaking nations. Many decadent German artists later merged with these predominant movements, as was the case with the "George-Kreis" (the circle around Stefan George), and their journal *Bltter fur die Kunst* as well as with the Prague circle and Max Brod, who later turned towards the Jewish tradition.

Brod was born in 1884 in the three-culture city of Prague which at that time still belonged to the Austrian Empire. He grew up when the major phase of the new artistic movement took place in France and when German-language literature still strongly adhered to Realism and Naturalism. Brod turned to and discussed the notion of decadence after it had stirred the English Nineties, after the beginning of "Jugendstil" (Art Nouveau; named after the journal *Die Jugend* which first appeared in Germany in 1896), and after the "Jung-Wiener" had come together in the 1890s in Austria. It appears that "Dekadenz-Literatur" was produced mainly by elitist groups in either Berlin, Munich, or Vienna. But an influential literary circle developed also in the German and German-Jewish parts of Prague, often called the "Prager Kreis." Besides Max Brod, the circle included Hugo Salus, Leppin, Rilke, Kafka, Werfel, and Urzidil.

Even though for Max Brod decadence was only an interlude with few ideological or stylistic consequences, it acquired a particular meaning in his early works. He tried to clarify his personal association with decadence by creating a new variant called "Indifferentismus."¹ Although Brod had been greatly influenced by French authors like Laforgue, Rimbaud, Flaubert, and Huysmans, it was the writings of Schopenhauer which initiated his Weltanschauung. For Brod "indifferentism" represented a specific existential philosophy. He believed that all forms of existence, whether good or evil, depended on the same laws of causality, which rendered life meaningless, for man had no choice. He saw a vicious circle out of which there was no escape, and "indifferentism" seemed the appropriate form of survival. This pessimistic attitude reflected the general atmosphere at the turn of the century, the "Untergangsstimmung" (i.e. atmosphere of doom), the revolt against the bourgeois system, against superficiality, against traditions, against estranged human relations, habits, and beliefs.

Representative of this form of literary decadence are Max Brod's works *Tod den Toten: Novellen des Indifferenten* (a collection of eleven novellas written between 1902

¹ Etymological origins: the French noun "indiff rentisme" was derived from the adjective "indiff rent"—originally Latin—during the eighteenth century, migrating later to England and Germany. Some meanings are: (1) the principle that differences of religious belief are of no importance; (2) the doctrine that differences between mind and matter should not exist but unify in something beyond them; (3) political undecidedness; (4) an apathetic attitude.

and 1906, and later published as *Die Einsamen*²), *Experimente*³ (four novellas published in 1907), and his novel *Schloß Normenbygge: der Roman des Indifferenten*⁴ (written between 1903 and 1908). The reception of these works differed in the German-speaking cultural centers at the time of their appearance. In Berlin *Schloß Normenbygge* especially caused a sensation, whereas it was misunderstood in Vienna. The “New-Romantics” there disagreed with the ideological orientation of the book, which predicted astonishingly—as Kafka did later, but in a different manner—sociopolitical changes of Western society. Today these works are forgotten and its author is known for the most part as Kafka’s editor. The following paragraphs will give a short introduction to a selection of Brod’s writings mentioned above.

The novella “Tod den Toten” was written under the motto “nil admirari!” and the novella “Indifferentismus” of the same collection under the motto “omnia admirari!”—an opposition of concepts which underscores the essence of Brod’s decadence: everything is the same, regardless of whether one admires everything or nothing. In “Tod den Toten” the protagonist Gottfried Tock, a billionaire in Berlin, attempts to reveal the laws inherent in the process of art production and art reception. He tries to find his identity within that process and collects the most valuable art objects which he stores in a room designed as a theater. In this absurd theater, dusty art objects represent actors and spectators at the same time, annihilating each other and being forgotten. Tock considers old art an anachronism which he wishes to destroy, because admiration of the dead kills the spirit of life and the sense of existence. In effect, however, Tock is part of his own collection, doomed to die, because he himself has fled life and become a disillusioned “statue.” Realizing this, Tock blows up his home, his collection, and dies in the flames of the past. The novella is written in a dialogue form with a stage-setting-like introduction instead of a “Rahmenhandlung” (i.e. an enveloping narrative structure, or a story-within-a-story technique). The narrative itself consists of a discussion between Gottfried Tock and Karl Winter, an idealistic student from Prague, who visits the old friend of his father. Brod writes in the present tense and carefully increases the suspense with a dynamic style towards the catastrophic end.

In contrast to this pessimistic, life-negating novella is the story of the ill Leo Grottek in “Indifferentismus.” Here Brod’s concept should be interpreted in a more optimistic, life-supporting sense, although it centers around disease, and although its protagonist is also condemned to die after he has found his individual truth. The boy Leo learns to find his identity in spite of his illness and sees himself as part of the world and thus shows that the human being is not limited to just passive observation and resigned acceptance of fate. By integrating himself into the flow of existence he can limit the destructive forces of pessimism. This is what little Leo does and it makes him sovereign over his destiny.

In the collection *Experimente* Brod criticizes with a slightly satirical tone the society of Prague and the implications of the class structure on certain individuals. He describes the so-called freedom people have to experiment with their lives, experiments that end up in the stereotyped pattern of established social codes. “Bürgerliche Liebe” (1905), for example, analyzes flirtation schemes and bourgeois love affairs which confront Seff Plemscheier, a peasant from the country. Brod talks about the hypocrisy of human sentiments, their false excitements, and he shows how social codes transform the individual into a passive being who is no longer capable of

² Max Brod, *Die Einsamen* (München: Kurt Wolff Verlag, 1919).

³ -----, *Experimente* (Berlin: Axel Junker Verlag, 1907).

⁴ -----, *Schloß Normenbygge* (Leipzig und Wien: Kurt Wolff Verlag, 1918).

developing true feelings. "Die Stadt der Mittellosen" (1906), on the other hand, is the story of Francis Carus Gehmann and his short love affair with the salesgirl Ruschena. Brod here criticizes the vicious causality that determines the functioning of a city by the presence of its rich inhabitants. His protagonist represents passive subordination and indifferent acceptance. He does not comprehend that individual existence has to be fought for, and he refuses to love, which drives the more active Ruschena to commit suicide.

The culmination of Brod's period of "indifferentism" is no doubt his novel *Schloß Nornepygge*, which integrates all aspects of this Weltanschauung. It is not so much a novel about a castle as about the tragedy of its owner, the protagonist Walder Nornepygge. The novel describes the desperate quest of an individual for his proper identity. Walder, an intellectual whose inventions have made him a multimillionaire, searches for his true ego and the essence of existence by means of four transformations which he mistakes for his identity (Club of the Differentiated, faithful bourgeois husband, sexual excesses à la Don Juan, sufferings of a hermit). He embodies pessimistic "indifferentism" in extremis until he has to see that it does not furnish easy solutions, a realization that destroys him. Walder Nornepygge gets trapped in the vicious circle of self-made causality instead of learning to master natural causality and to control its effects. Not understanding the implications of liberty, he is imprisoned by his desire for it. "Viva la Liberta!" is the title of the last episode which represents only the liberty to commit suicide. The final transformation thus consists of the realization that all experiences are but variants of one unified life. However, instead of seeing growth, Walder only sees failure from which the sole escape is suicide. Brod's antihero is captured in an antimetamorphosis which he justifies by claiming that he is the monstrous victim of modern times, of destructive technology, of colonialism, and of a surfeit of possibilities. Hence, the protagonist's fatal settling of an account with the self does not just question the actions of a specific individual but it questions the existence of modern man and society on the whole. Brod does not only reflect a pessimistic Weltanschauung and the general atmosphere of his time with its stylized cult of beauty, the artificial paradises and oversensitized eroticism—all this with a gloomy old Prague and the end of an era as a background. But at the same time, he expresses his belief that the deterministic Zeitgeist hinders the human being from making an individual choice.

Although much of the style in *Schloß Nornepygge* already foreshadows expressionism, this novel clearly remains of the decadent genre. Brod's narrative fluctuates between romantic-sentimental and realistic-naturalistic tendencies. Monologues and visions throughout the text hint of stream-of-consciousness technique, which again is contrasted with elaborate dialogues or detailed descriptions of spooky, diseased, artificial circumstances. In addition, his grotesque elaborations contain the irony of a strong sociohistorical critique which also applies to his other works mentioned here.

Generally speaking, Brod's transformation of the notion decadence, "Indifferentismus," is a unique interpretation compared with the French and English variants, for it is sociopolitically more critical. His contribution to the cultural phenomenon consisted neither of a dandyistic life-style nor of an elitist journal or an aesthetic theory, but of an existential philosophy which, although marked by its time, already seemed to look beyond it. "Indifferentismus" is an example of a paradigm of communicability within the discourse on decadence, one which deserves attention.