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C.S. Lewis, Thomas Wolfe, and the Transatlantic Expression of *Sehnsucht*

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The complex notion of *Sehnsucht* is today frequently discussed in relation to the work of C. S. Lewis. Indeed, when *Sehnsucht* is evoked by English-speaking critics, it is often the particular *Sehnsucht* Lewis described and reimagined as a form of spiritual longing: what Lewis referred to as “spilled religion.”¹ However, years before Lewis came to describe the *Sehnsucht* evoked by the “low line of the Castlereagh hills”—not far off but “quite unattainable”—in *Surprised by Joy* (1955), the American novelist Thomas Wolfe filled his own gargantuan novels with *Sehnsucht*, producing an ontology of longing that grappled with alienation in a world where insatiable desires haunted his romantic protagonists.² These figures, thinly discussed *doppelgängers* for Wolfe himself, were forever yearning for something unnameable and unattainable, captured in Wolfe’s symbolic refrain from *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929): “a stone, a leaf, an unfound door.”³

This brief essay stems from a much broader project where I employ the interpretative lens of *Sehnsucht* in order to explore Wolfe’s career-long preoccupation with longing, linking his expression of *Sehnsucht* with the transatlantic exchange of ideas surrounding homesickness, nostalgia, and longing. As such, this comparative analysis of Wolfe and Lewis is necessarily limited: even a cursory introduction to the nearly forgotten work of Wolfe, or a proper

theorization of *Sehnsucht*, is impossible within the confines of this short piece. Instead, I will provide a short introduction to the German conception of *Sehnsucht*, stressing the fact that both Wolfe and Lewis offer different, transatlantic visions of a distinctly Romantic clarion call of insatiable desire. Turning to Joy Davidman’s essay “The Longest Way Round” (1951), I will end with a discussion of the sole instance where the *Sehnsucht* of Lewis and Wolfe has been directly compared, arguing that both authors offer significant perspectives on the nature and purpose of longing.

An Excess of *Sehnsucht*

In the world of academia, Thomas Wolfe amounts to little more than a footnote in many contemporary works of literary history. This is despite the fact that he was once favorably compared with his three more enduring contemporaries—F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner—and that today his influence lingers in the works of novelists as varied as Ray Bradbury, William H. Gass, Philip Roth, and Stephen King. What was compelling for contemporary readers of Wolfe’s fiction—as well as for those writers for whom Wolfe’s specter is still present—was his romantic and effusive prose: Wolfe’s attempt to articulate what he called the “impossible, hopeless, incurable and unutterable homesickness of the American, who is maddened by a longing

for return, and does not know to what he can return.”⁴ What critics have identified merely as rhetorical excess in Wolfe’s fiction was actually his own attempt to capture something of this insatiable desire. In an exemplary passage of Wolfe’s writing on longing, he describes his vision of Americans as people who “do not know to what [they] can return” and are thus “maddened” by a “smothering and incurable ache” for something they cannot identify.⁵ Here we might recall Lewis’s own articulation of desire without a finite object, explored in his sermon “The Weight of Glory” (1942): “The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not *in* them, it only came *through* them, and what came through them was longing. These things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers.”⁶

Lewis’s reconfiguration of *Sehnsucht* as spiritual desire effectively solves the problem of Wolfe’s own protagonists, who yearned for something unidentifiable, unutterable, and finally unreachable. For Lewis, these desires were “spilled religion,” evidence of an eternal reality. While Lewis’s vision of *Sehnsucht* is compelling, it is problematic that *Sehnsucht* only be conceptualized as evidence of a spiritual reality, or indeed that the word always implied that for those who used it. The notion has a long and important heritage in German thought; for the philosopher Martin Heidegger, a contemporary of Wolfe’s, *Sehnsucht* was a “fundamental attunement of philosophizing,” an extension of the Romantic preoccupation with unsatisfiable longing that Heidegger described as “coming to be at home in one’s own self.”⁷ In articulating his understanding of *Sehnsucht*, Heidegger frequently turned to the work of Friedrich Schelling, particularly *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* (1809), in which Schelling had

stressed the centrality of *Sehnsucht* to human identity: “We must imagine the original yearning [*Sehnsucht*] as it directs itself to the understanding, though still not recognizing it, just as we in our yearning [*Sehnsucht*] seek out unknown and nameless good, and as it moves, divining itself, like a wave-wound, whirling sea, akin to Plato’s matter, following dark, uncertain law, incapable of constructing for itself anything enduring.”⁸

Defining *Sehnsucht*

Sehnsucht exactly captures the intermingled nature of longing in Wolfe’s fiction, which is not simply homesickness, nostalgia, or nihilism, but instead, an addiction to the very act of longing. According to the *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, the verb *Sehen* approximates the English “to long,” or, more strongly, “to crave,” and Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm use a number of quotations from Romantic poets to gesture toward the insatiable nature of the longing.⁹ The noun *Sucht*—which is combined with *Sehen* to produce *Sehnsucht*—implied “physical illness” in its early usage, but most nearly translates as “addiction.” *Sucht* entered the English lexicon briefly in the nineteenth century as part of a curious mental disease named *Grübelnsucht*, which one psychiatrist described as “metaphysical insanity.”¹⁰ *Sehnsucht*, the composite of these two concepts, is thus virtually untranslatable, but its suggestion of both an infinite and inarticulate yearning, as well as a compulsive addiction to the very experience of longing, provides a productive theoretical lens through which to perceive Wolfe’s ontology of longing.

Importantly, *Sehnsucht* was a fundamental concept in the development of German Romantic thought; William O’Brien suggests that *Sehnsucht* demonstrated “the failure of signification,” incessantly pointing to “an Absolute that hovers right there or right here, always transcendently and tantalizingly out of reach,” while for German philosophers of Romanticism—like Schelling,

Schlegel and Novalis—yearning is always tempered by the impossibility of satisfaction.¹¹ Similarly, John M. Baker identifies the earlier significance of *Sehnsucht* for the understanding of consciousness in German Idealism, pointing to Fichte’s “typification of consciousness” as a yearning that “feels itself wanting, an activity without object.”¹² In “The Musicality of the Past” (2007), Kiene Wurth links *Sehnsucht* to an eighteenth-century occupation with the sublime, pointing out the subsequent Romantic preoccupation with the infinite, and arguing that it performed a “simultaneity of pain and pleasure,” unable to transcend the “double-bind that the infinite for which it longs is, so to speak, included in a past that it irrevocably lost.”¹³

Recently, Sean Gaston has explored the meaning of *Sehnsucht* in his book *The Impossible Mourning of Jacques Derrida* (2006). “*Sehnsucht*,” Gaston suggests, is “a yearning sickness, a longing addiction that *displaces* any present, definite object and always leaves a gap [. . .]. Elusive, mercurial, always beyond one’s grasp, *Sehnsucht* describes an *infinite* yearning for the *infinite*.”¹⁴ Gaston identifies the term’s Romantic heritage, arguing that *Sehnsucht* is integral to Romanticism’s central project, its “longing for *something* in the external world that only reveals a *deeper* yearning for a *hidden* internal world.”¹⁵ For Gaston, *Sehnsucht* provides both the “genesis” and “structure” of Romantic transcendence, as an expression of both a yearning for “a hidden inner world” and a “longing for something outside” that provides the “possibility” for transcendence.¹⁶ Hence, *Sehnsucht* is at once creative and destructive, a yearning sickness: in Gaston’s phrasing it is both a “torment *and* a marvel.”¹⁷

Lewis’s Reconceptualization of *Sehnsucht*

As early as 1933, Lewis began to work out his theme of *Sehnsucht* in *The Pilgrim’s Regress* (1933), his revision of Bunyan that follows

the character John—a young man brought up in a rigorous, rules-based tradition of faith—through the philosophical landscape of the early twentieth century, and whose quest begins when he is awakened to “Sweet Desire.” Lewis’s explanation of this desire, in a preface written ten years later, constitutes his most precise definition of *Sehnsucht*: “The experience is one of intense longing. It is distinguished from other longings by two things. In the first place, though the sense of want is acute and even painful, yet the mere wanting is felt to be somehow a delight. Other desires are felt as pleasures only if satisfaction is expected in the near future: hunger is pleasant only while we know (or believe) that we are soon going to eat. But this desire, even when there is no hope of possible satisfaction, continues to be prized, and even to be preferred to anything else in the world, by those who have once felt it. This hunger is better than any other fullness; this poverty better than all other wealth. And thus it comes about, that if the desire is long absent, it may itself be desired, and that new desiring becomes a new instance of the original desire, though the subject may not at once recognise the fact and thus cries out for his lost youth of soul at the very moment in which he is being rejuvenated [. . .]. For this sweet Desire cuts across our ordinary distinctions between wanting and having. To have it is, by definition, a want: to want it, we find, is to have it.”¹⁸

Lewis defended the significance of this experience of longing; in an essay titled “Christianity and Culture” (1940), where he uses the term *Sehnsucht* to describe his early experiences of joy in longing, he writes that “the dangers of romantic *Sehnsucht* are very great. Eroticism and even occultism lie in wait for it. On this subject I can only give my own experience for what it is worth [. . .] in this process I have not (or not yet) reached a point at which I can honestly repent of my early experiences of romantic *Sehnsucht*.”¹⁹ In a revision of this statement he adds: “I am quite ready to describe *Sehnsucht* as ‘spilled religion,’ provided it is not forgotten that the

spilled drops may be full of blessing to the unconverted man who licks them up, and therefore begins to search for the cup whence they were spilled.”²⁰

The expression of *Sehnsucht* in the work of C. S. Lewis as an acute and painful longing for the infinite—where “to want it, we find, is to have it”—articulates the same character of desire that was prevalent in the works of Thomas Wolfe: longing for the sake of longing. Like Wolfe, Lewis was also interested in German Romanticism, and he admits in *Surprised by Joy* that he was “a votary of the Blue Flower,” pointing to the *blaue Blume* that Frederick Burwick has noted is among the most readily identifiable symbols of Romantic *Sehnsucht*, most famously found in the opening of Novalis’s *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1802): “The youth lay restless on his bed and thought about the stranger and his stories. ‘There is no greed in my heart; but I yearn to get a glimpse of the blue flower.’”²¹

The German influence on Lewis’s understanding of *Sehnsucht*, particularly in light of a spiritual longing, can be seen through the impact of the Scottish writer George MacDonald. MacDonald’s impact on Lewis is well-documented; Lewis recalls purchasing a copy of MacDonald’s fantasy romance *Phantastes* (1858), noting that having already been “waste-deep in Romanticism,” *Phantastes* was “romantic enough in all conscience; but there was a difference [. . .]. What it actually did to me was to convert, even to baptize [. . .] my imagination.”²² MacDonald’s romantic vision, anchored to a spiritual reality, enabled Lewis to see that “the quality which had enchanted me in his imaginative works turned out to be the quality of the real universe, the divine, magical, terrifying, and ecstatic reality in which we all live [. . .] that elusive Form which if once seen must inevitably be desired with all but sensuous desire—the thing (in Sappho’s phrase) ‘more gold than gold.’”²³ For MacDonald, the German Romantic Novalis was a formative influence on his own

romantic vision, particularly evident in the *bildungsroman* of Anodos in *Phantastes*, whose journey through Fairy Land traces the young man’s quest to locate the true source and fulfillment of Romantic *Sehnsucht*. MacDonald scatters a number of quotations from Novalis throughout *Phantastes*, and Kerry Dearborn argues that Novalis’s “passionate hunger and thirst for God, and for meaning beyond this life,” was instrumental in MacDonald’s deep appreciation for the romantic author.²⁴ Indeed, MacDonald eventually translated Novalis’s *Hymns to the Night* and *Spiritual Songs* in his anthology of European poems and hymns titled *Rampolli* (1897), in which he discovered that Novalis’s proclamation of “the fleeting, extinguished life” of “endless longing [*Sehnsucht*]” has been turned finally to “the beloved Jesus”:

A dream will dash our chains apart,
And lay us on the Father’s heart.²⁵

In 1930, Lewis reflected on his reading of *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, writing that it was a “very Macdonaldy book,” full of “‘holiness,’ gloriously German-romantic,” and this reading prompted Lewis to conclude that “Novalis is perhaps the greatest single influence on Macdonald.”²⁶ The vital difference between Wolfe and Lewis in their expression of *Sehnsucht* can be traced back to the influence of MacDonald; in *Phantastes*, after Anodos dies, MacDonald noted that “if my passions were dead, the souls of those passions, those essential mysteries of the spirit which had embodied themselves in the passions, and had given to them all their glory and wonderment, yet lived, yet glowed, with a pure, undying fire. They rose above their vanishing earthly garments.”²⁷ For Lewis, *Sehnsucht* ultimately pointed to a theological solution to insatiable hunger, observing in *Mere Christianity* (1952) that: “If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”²⁸

The Longest Way Round

Though Lewis and Wolfe were both in Oxford in 1926—while Wolfe was working on the first version of *Look Homeward, Angel*—there is no indication the two authors met. Lewis himself never visited the United States, though in response to a letter from Mary Van Deusen—a regular correspondent from Hendersonville, North Carolina, who would often include photos of the local American landscape—Lewis wrote that “the new photos raise extreme *Sehnsucht*: each a landscape as fulfils my dreams. *That* is the America I wd. like to see.”²⁹ It was Joy Davidman—the American poet and writer who later married C. S. Lewis—who noted the connection between Wolfe’s unutterable longing and Lewis’s spiritual yearning. Davidman recorded her conversion experience in 1949, published two years later as the essay “The Longest Way Round” (1951), in which she invokes Wolfe as a writer of “the undiscovered country”: “There is a myth that has always haunted mankind, the legend of the Way Out. ‘A stone, a leaf, an unfound door,’ wrote Thomas Wolfe—the door leading out of time and space into Somewhere Else [. . .]. The symbol varies with different men; for some, the door itself is important; for others, the undiscovered country beyond it—the never-never land, Saint Brendan’s Island, the Land of Heart’s Desire.”³⁰

Davidman goes on to write that it was C. S. Lewis and *The Pilgrim’s Regress* that taught her the meaning of this “never-never land,” contending that the myth of Wolfe’s unfound door actually pointed to a broader spiritual need for a home “more our home than any earthly country.”³¹ In the same way that Lewis identified the object of his *Sehnsucht* as having a spiritual source, Davidman sees the clues of a spiritual reality in Wolfe’s “legend of the Way Out,” and just as MacDonald’s romances helped clarify for Lewis that what he desired was “goodness,” Lewis in turn provides the spiritual meaning for Davidman’s own indefinable yearning.

Davidman completed this essay before having ever contacted Lewis and it stands as the earliest instance of connection between Lewis’s and Wolfe’s expressions of *Sehnsucht*. While Lewis would eventually give a theological inflection to his reading of *Sehnsucht*, Wolfe never provided a way out for his yearning protagonists, instead remaining committed to what both Schelling and Heidegger perceived in *Sehnsucht*: that in longing we *are*.

¹ C. S. Lewis, “Christianity and Culture,” in *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1967), 23.

² C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1955), 14.

³ Thomas Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel: A Story of the Buried Life* (1929; repr. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1936), 2.

⁴ Thomas Wolfe, *Of Time and the River* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1935), 857.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ C. S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” in *Essay Collection: Faith, Christianity and the Church*, ed. Lesley Walmsley (London: HarperCollins, 2000), 98–99.

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude* trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 5; Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin’s Hymn “The Ister”* trans. William McNeill and Julia Davis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 49.

⁸ Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 29–30.

⁹ *Deutsches Wörterbuch Online*, s.v. “Sehen,” accessed November 26, 2013, <http://woerterbuchnetz.de>.

¹⁰ Conolly Norman, “A Rare form of Mental Disease (Grübelsucht),” *Transactions of the Royal Academy of Medicine in Ireland* 6, no. 1 (December 1888): 62.

¹¹ William Arctander O'Brien, *Novalis: Signs of Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 111. In *The Romantic Imperative* (2003), Frederick C. Beiser notes that "[o]ne of the most remarkable traits of [. . .] German romantics was their belief in the metaphysical stature of art." See Frederick C. Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 73.

¹² John M. Baker Jr., "Loss and Expectation: Temporal Entwinement as Theme and Figure in Novalis, Wordsworth, Nerval, and Leopardi" in *Romantic Poetry*, ed. Angela Esterhammer (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2002), 64.

¹³ Kiene Wurth, "The Musicality of the Past: *Sehnsucht*, Trauma, and the Sublime," *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 1, no. 2 (2007): 222.

¹⁴ Sean Gaston, *The Impossible Mourning of Jacques Derrida* (London: Continuum, 2006), 66.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 67-68.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁸ C. S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim's Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason, and Romanticism*, rev. ed. (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1943), 7-8.

¹⁹ Lewis, "Christianity and Culture," 23.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 23n1.

²¹ Frederick Burwick, *The Damnation of Newton: Goethe's Color Theory and Romantic Perception* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1986), 109; Novalis, *Henry von Ofterdingen: A Novel*, trans. Palmer Hilty (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1964), 1.

²² C. S. Lewis, preface to *George MacDonald: An Anthology*, ed. C. S. Lewis (1946; repr. London: Collins, 1983), 33-34.

²³ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

²⁴ Kerry Dearborn, *Baptized Imagination: The Theology of George MacDonald* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2006), 40.

²⁵ Novalis, *Hymns to the Night*, in Rampolli, ed. and trans. George MacDonald (London: Longmans, Green, 1897).

²⁶ C. S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves, 13 August 1930 in *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis, Volume I:*

Family Letters, 1905–1931, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 922.

²⁷ George MacDonald, *Phantastes: A Faerie Romance for Men and Women* (London: Smith, Elder, 1858), 313.

²⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1952), 106.

²⁹ C. S. Lewis to Mary Van Deusen, 6 June 1952 in *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis, Volume III: Narnia, Cambridge and Joy*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 199. In an earlier letter to Mary from May 5, 1952, Lewis wrote that: "The landscape lures one into it. I long to be tramping over those wooded – or, what is better, half wooded hills. I'm as sensitive as a German to the spell of *das Ferne* and all that." See *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis, Volume III*, 186.

³⁰ Joy Davidman, "The Longest Way Round" in *Out of My Bone: The Letters of Joy Davidman*, Don W. King (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 88.

³¹ *Ibid.*