

Symposium Report: People of Faith, Voices of Tradition— Germanic Heritage Languages among Christians and Jews

Mark Loudon



Photo credit: Kelly Hofer

Hutterite girls observing the process of building a dike, Manitoba, Canada

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The focus of our recent MKI symposium, “People of Faith, Voices of Tradition: Germanic Heritage Languages among Christians and Jews,” which took place on the UW–Madison campus March 30–April 1, 2017, was on North American minority languages that have remained vital for generations after immigration. Speakers of Amish Swiss German, Hutterite German, Mennonite Low German, Pennsylvania Dutch, and Yiddish have all successfully resisted

the pressure to give up their heritage languages in favor of English, despite a general consensus among linguists that fully one-half of the approximately 7,000 languages spoken across the globe today are considered endangered, that is, at risk of no longer being used actively in communities of speakers.

What makes a language endangered? The majority of the world's languages are spoken by very small populations, often indigenous people

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Friends of the Max Kade Institute

for German-American Studies
432 East Campus Mall, Madison, WI 53706
608-262-7546 • mkifriends.org

Dear Friends,

I am writing to ask you to help the Max Kade Institute at UW–Madison reach a critical fund-raising deadline. As you know, the MKI directors and staff have for a number of years worked hard to complete a sizable, multi-year challenge grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Funds raised have paid for the renovation of the fourth floor of the University Club, which became a new home for the Institute and its library in 2014, as well as for an endowment to support the MKI's librarian/archivist position.

As a member of the Friends, you have undoubtedly enjoyed the wealth of programs and outreach activities provided by the Institute's gifted and dedicated scholars and educators. But you may not know how much the MKI accomplishes on a very modest annual budget, and how carefully the Institute manages its resources. What's more, the directors and staff have proven to be energetic fundraisers. By reaching out to the Friends, new donors, and sponsors, they have raised over \$800,000 towards their five-year goal of \$900,000. Combined with the over \$260,000 in 3:1 matching funds already received from the NEH, MKI so far has raised over one million dollars.

You, our Friends, have been incredibly generous over the years. Now, with the five-year grant period coming to an end, and the last NEH deadline approaching fast, may I ask you to help the Institute raise the last \$100,000 by July 1, 2017? This is a decisive moment for the Max Kade Institute. Any amount is greatly appreciated and will help establish the Institute as a significant and lasting organization in Wisconsin's cultural and educational landscape. Your donations are tax deductible.

You can donate [online by going to mki.wisc.edu](http://mki.wisc.edu). Click on the "Donate to the MKI Library Campaign" button, and follow the lead to the "MKI Librarian Support Fund." Or you can [write a check to the "University of Wisconsin Foundation"](#) with "MKI Librarian Support Fund" in the subject line and mail it to:

Max Kade Institute
432 East Campus Mall
Madison, WI 53706

With all good wishes,

John Pustejovsky
President
May 2, 2017

Greetings, Friends and Readers!

We at the Max Kade Institute can look back on another successful year of work demonstrating the reach of MKI across Wisconsin, the nation, and the world. Together, Antje Petty and I gave literally dozens of presentations to community groups across the state, mainly outside of Madison. MKI is pleased to work closely with the UW Speakers Bureau (<https://speakers.wisc.edu>), whose mission is to promote the Wisconsin Idea through direct engagement of UW staff and faculty in the state. I encourage our Friends who have connections with local groups, especially public libraries, to refer them to the Speakers Bureau website for ideas for presenters on a range of topics at no cost to the sponsoring group.

On the national level, Antje, Cora Lee, and I all traveled to Philadelphia in April and made presentations at the annual symposium of the Society for German-American Studies, the premier professional organization in our field. MKI has close, longstanding ties with SGAS. One of our stalwart MKI Friends and a past Friends Board member, Karyl Rommelfanger, is the membership chair for the society and played a central role in the planning and organization of this year's symposium, in addition to helping to build the membership of the society. Thank you, Karyl!

The presentations at this year's SGAS symposium were held at the German Society of Pennsylvania

(GSP), America's oldest German-American organization, which was founded in 1764 (<http://www.germansociety.org>). Over the past few years we have worked closely with the GSP, whose Joseph P. Horner Memorial Library is an amazing repository of German-American publications. The GSP has generously donated to our Library/Archive literally hundreds of valuable materials, mainly books and copies of pamphlets, that are duplicates of Horner materials. Kevin, assisted by JoAnn Tiedemann, has done a wonderful job of organizing these donations for integration into our collection. Speaking of the library and archive, I want to express my deep gratitude to JoAnn and also to Charles James for all they do for us in helping to process new donations to our collection and organize and interpret our unique materials. Thank you!

In this Newsletter you will find an extensive report on our spring conference, "People of Faith, Voices of Tradition: Germanic Heritage Languages in Christian and Jewish Faith Communities." Building on the momentum from this successful event, which would not have been possible without the support of numerous campus partners and the Max Kade Foundation in New York, I will be traveling this summer to the University of Marburg for a month of research and outreach. Among other things I will be working with colleagues there to strengthen the

ties between MKI and the German Language Atlas Research Center in Marburg, with an eye toward organizing jointly sponsored events in the near future.

All in all, this has been a busy and thoroughly enjoyable year. I want to close by expressing our deep appreciation to you, our Friends, for your support in so many ways. Our Beer Fest in October was again successful, thanks not only to the generosity of the Zamzow family and Bull Falls Brewery, but also the hard work that Antje, Fran Luebke, and John Pustejovsky in particular put into the preparations. Vielen herzlichen Dank!

As we approach the finish line for the NEH Challenge Grant on July 1, which John addresses in his letter on the facing page, I want to extend to you special words of gratitude for your kind generosity. Your support has made it possible for us to find a new and more spacious home in the University Club, where we can better succeed in fulfilling our mission. You have also helped us to secure the future of our Librarian/Archivist position, which, along with our Associate Director's position, is absolutely crucial to the work of MKI. Thank you, good Friends! We wish you all a wonderful summer and look forward to seeing you in the fall!

—Mark

who comprise politically weak minority groups in the countries in which they live. These languages are not often used in writing, nor do many enjoy official recognition or governmental support. The pressure on minority language users to assimilate to the language of the larger societies is therefore hard to resist. In immigration situations, language shift is the norm. In the United States and English-speaking Canada, for example, the children of non-English-speaking immigrants—including Hispanics, contrary to widespread stereotypes—typically prefer English by the time they reach adulthood. By the third generation, the loss of a heritage language is usually complete. Yet speakers of the languages represented at our symposium not only have resisted a shift to English, but in certain groups the languages are thriving, with the numbers of speakers doubling every twenty years or so, a growth rate unmatched by any other speech community on the planet. Just how this has been possible was a main question of “People of Faith, Voices of Tradition.”

The key to understanding the vitality of the five languages we explored at the symposium, whose historical roots all lie in German-speaking Central Europe, has to do with their association with highly traditional Christian and Jewish faith communities, specifically conservative Amish, Mennonite, Hutterite, and Ashkenazic Hasidic groups. Far from remaining frozen in time, despite their outward conservatism in dress and culture, these groups have all charted a middle course between preserva-

tion and assimilation by selectively adopting certain aspects of the larger societies in which they live without compromising their connection to a spiritual heritage that remains at the center of their daily lives.

Most of the presentations at the symposium looked at the various ways Amish Swiss German, Hutterite German, Mennonite Low German, Pennsylvania Dutch, and Yiddish are all thriving today. Miriam Isaacs,

for example, shared insights from her longstanding research among Yiddish-speaking Hasidim in North America and Israel. A native speaker of Yiddish herself who was born in Germany after World War II, Miriam earned her doctorate in linguistics at Cornell University and is considered the premier expert on Yiddish spoken by the Hasidim. Her presentation shared the different ways Yiddish is used in media produced for Hasidim

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Front page of *Der Blatt*, a contemporary Yiddish-American newspaper published in New York

of all ages, including children, an important sign of the contemporary vitality of the language.

A more historical perspective on Yiddish that underscored how the language has also been lost among non-orthodox Ashkenazic Jews in Europe and elsewhere was provided by Jürg Fleischer, a professor at the University of Marburg in Germany. What most people think of as Yiddish is actually a group of dialects spoken historically in Eastern Europe. “Western Yiddish,” however, refers to varieties that were spoken into the twentieth century mainly in parts of southwestern Germany, eastern France, and Switzerland. Jürg’s presentation focused on the different sources we have to document Western Yiddish, which include literary and other texts written in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as recorded interviews made

with native speakers after the Second World War.

Another of our guests from Germany was Heinrich Siemens, who is both a native speaker of Mennonite Low German (also known as Plautdietsch) and one of the strongest public advocates for the language. Heinrich, whose doctoral dissertation was on the history of Plautdietsch, provided a good overview of how the language has developed among a group of Mennonites who originated in Dutch- and Frisian-speaking northwestern Europe, but who migrated eastward into Poland and the Russian Empire. Today, the geographic diversity of Plautdietsch speakers is somewhat comparable to that of Yiddish. While there are still many living in Russia and Central Asia, a number, like Heinrich’s family, have settled in Germany, but most are living in North and especially

Latin America. The most active users of Plautdietsch are highly traditional Mennonites in isolated communities in Mexico, Bolivia, and Paraguay. However, while the physical and social isolation of these Low German-speaking Mennonites promotes the maintenance of their heritage language, it is true that more assimilated groups still speak Plautdietsch as well.

Complementing Heinrich Siemens’s presentation was that given by Christopher Cox, a Plautdietsch-speaking linguist at Carleton University in Ottawa. Most of Chris’s research centers on Mennonite Low German in Canada, which has a long history of Mennonite immigration from Russia, emigration into Latin America, and more recently back to Canada from the south. His presentation focused on small but highly significant differences in the varieties of Plautdietsch spoken by people living within the same communities—in some cases, the same families—in the Saskatchewan Valley in central Canada. Chris showed that variation across Plautdietsch speakers is not only a legacy of immigration history, but a marker of social differences today.

Three other presentations focused on the sociolinguistic situation of groups who speak what is known popularly as Pennsylvania Dutch (PD). This language, despite its name, developed from German dialects spoken mainly in the Palatinate region of southwestern Germany that were brought in the eighteenth century to colonial Pennsylvania. Steve Hartman Keiser, a linguist at Marquette University, investigated interesting patterns of variation within PD that correlate with both



Mennonite family in Campeche, Mexico

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geographic and social factors. Steve, a leading expert on the development of PD in the Midwest as it moved away from its origins in Pennsylvania, shared with us examples drawn from the recently completed translation of the Christian Bible into PD by a committee of Midwestern native speakers. All these speakers are also fluent in English, and therefore, contact with English is an important factor in how the language has changed over time. Steve addressed this topic by investigating patterns of language use among various traditional (Old Order) Amish who are now employed in non-Amish owned enterprises where English is predominant, and among more progressive churches, such as the Beachy Amish, where English has increasingly been incorporated in worship services.

The Old Order Amish—like their close spiritual cousins, the horse-and-buggy-driving Old Order Mennonites, who also speak Pennsylvania Dutch—continue to use a form of standard (High) German in worship. Although “Amish High German” is quite similar to European standard German, there are a number of differences, especially in pronunciation and vocabulary. Since it is essential for Amish and Old Order Mennonites to learn High German for use in worship, it is taught as a subject in their parochial schools and by parents at home. In order to promote literacy in High German, people from mainly Amish communities, including a number of teachers, have formed the group “Lebhaftes Deutsch” (Lively or Active German). One of the members of the group,



Heinrich Siemens speaking at the conference

Lynn Marcus Miller, who is from an Amish settlement in Illinois, gave a fascinating talk on how German is used and taught in traditional communities and how the profile of the language might be raised through the efforts of groups like Lebhaftes Deutsch.

A different aspect was offered by Joshua Brown, a German linguist at the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire, who looked at developments in the use of Pennsylvania Dutch (PD) and Hutterite German. PD, which in the past served mostly as an oral medium among the sectarians, was once widely spoken also by non-sectarian residents of rural southeastern and central Pennsylvania, some of whom produced a sizeable body of written texts. Today, sectarians comprise the majority of active speakers of the language, and they have begun to write in PD, producing primarily children’s and religious literature. As

Josh noted, a parallel trend is underway among Hutterites. He shared the results of a survey he recently conducted among speakers of Hutterite German, which revealed their enthusiasm for preserving their heritage language, encouraging its use also by means of written texts.

The presentation by Guido Seiler, a professor of German linguistics in Munich, looked at a subgroup within the Amish who are not widely known, namely the so-called Swiss Amish. The descendants of immigrants who came in the nineteenth century from Switzerland and France to the Midwest, especially Indiana, the Swiss Amish maintain a distinct identity within the larger Old Order Amish community. Their language, which they call Shwitzer, is descended from Bernese Swiss German, although, as Guido underscored, it shows strong lexical and structural influence from Pennsylvania Dutch.

Guido compared Amish Shwitzer to a Swiss German variety spoken by Mennonites in the same area of Indiana, which is now nearly extinct. The Mennonite variety is more conservative than its “mixed” Amish counterpart and is therefore more easily comprehensible to modern Swiss people, especially from the Bernese region.

The final presentation of the symposium by MKI Director Mark Loudon tied together a number of strands from the other presentations by identifying some common characteristics of the Christian and Jewish communities that are essential for maintaining the heritage language. Mark observed that above all, the association of a language with a distinct social-spiritual identity is crucial to the continued health of the languages of the symposium. He noted that the members of each community had survived periods of severe persecution, which reinforced both their distinctiveness and also their commitment to their faith. Another commonality Mark discussed had to do with the lack of connection between the languages of these communities and an ancestral homeland in German-speaking Europe. In large part because of the persecution these Christians and Jews have endured, they have been compelled to settle in areas far distant from the homelands of their ancestors, thereby making their languages and other aspects of how they practice their faith highly “portable.”

In addition to the daytime presentations, the symposium featured two evening events. On Thursday, March 30, Mark moderated a panel of native speaker discussants titled “Lan-

guages and Lives.” Miriam Isaacs, Lynn Marcus Miller, and Heinrich Siemens were joined by Tony Waldner, a member of a Hutterite colony in North Dakota, to share some of their life experiences related to their native languages and to respond to questions from the audience. The next evening, attendees were treated to an hour of readings of original literature, mainly poetry, written in Yiddish, Mennonite Low German, Hutterite German, and Pennsylvania Dutch. In addition to several conference speakers, readers included two other colleagues from UW–Madison, Sunny Yudkoff, an assistant professor in the Department of German, Nordic, and Slavic and the Center for Jewish Studies, and Henry Sapoznik, director of the Mayrent Institute for Yiddish Culture, who both contributed readings in Yiddish.

We at MKI were very happy that so many people took part in the symposium: we had an average of 50 attendees throughout. Just as im-

portant was the friendly atmosphere the symposium generated. There were numerous conversations outside of the formal parts of the event, resulting in many new friendships. The diversity of our guests and attendees was matched by the diversity of our supporters, whose generosity made the symposium possible: the UW Anonymous Fund, the Center for German and European Studies, the Center for European Studies, the UW Lectures Committee, the Religious Studies Program, the Mosse-Weinstein Center for Jewish Studies, the Mayrent Institute for Yiddish Culture, and the Department of German, Nordic, Slavic (all part of the UW–Madison); the Friends of the Max Kade Institute; and the Max Kade Foundation, New York. 🌲



Road sign in a Swiss Amish community in Indiana

Friends Annual Meeting 2017: An Exploration of Milwaukee's German Art

Antje Petty

Milwaukee, Wisconsin, has often been called the “German Athens,” referring to a time in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, when a large German immigrant population contributed significantly to the city's social life, education, theater, music, and the arts. As the city grew more prosperous, the vibrant local arts scene was enhanced with art collected around the world, including from Germany. Many of these works are now in the collection of the Milwaukee Art Museum (MAM) and other city museums such as the Haggerty Museum at Marquette University.

On May 7, the Friends held their annual meeting in Milwaukee and got a glimpse of some of these artistic

riches. Our day started with an hour-long guided tour of the German art collection at the MAM. Recently renovated and with added gallery space, the museum now displays over 1000 additional works brought out from its vaults. The German and Austrian masterpieces we had a chance to view spanned four centuries and included numerous mediums of artistic expression: paintings, prints, sculptures, furniture, household objects, and more. There was a walnut-veneer cupboard from Frankfurt from the early 1700s, tankards made by the Meissen Porcelain Manufactory in Dresden from the same time period, and a metal table clock from Augsburg dating back to the late 1500s. On the other end of the time spectrum, we had a chance to contem-



Photo credit: collection.mam.org, John R. Glenbin

Ludwig Meidner (1884–1966), *Self-Portrait*, 1912. This painting inspired Marvin and Janet Fishman to focus their collecting on New Objectivity art.

plate Eva Hesse's installation *Right After* (1969) and Anselm Kiefer's oil painting *Midgard* (1985). We also saw works representing art movements as varied as German Expressionism (Gabriele Münter), Romanticism (Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller), and New Objectivity (Georg Grosz, Ludwig Meidner). In short, one hour was not nearly enough to take in the MAM's treasures, and many of us decided to return another time for a more in-depth visit.

For our business meeting and dinner we moved on to the Envoy Restaurant in the historic Ambassador Inn. Recently renovated and with its original Art Deco design restored, the restaurant was a beautiful and cozy venue for our event. Our day was capped with a lecture by Curtis



Photo credit: collection.mam.org, P. Richard Eells

Eva Hesse (1936–1970), *Right After*, 1969 Fiberglass installation

Carter, Professor of Philosophy and Aesthetics at Marquette University, titled “German Art, American City: the Fishman Collection in Milwaukee’s Museums.” The founding director of the Haggerty Museum at Marquette, Professor Curtis told the story of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) art collection of Milwaukee art collectors Marvin and Jane Fishman.

Marvin Fishman was a prominent Milwaukee real estate developer who among other things brought the NBA Basketball team the Milwaukee Bucks to town in 1968. He and his wife Janet began collecting art soon after they graduated in the late 1940s from the UW–Madison, and they eventually turned their attention toward early 20th-century German art, including examples of German Expressionism and the Weimar era. They gathered hundreds of oil paintings, watercolors and drawings—many of them disturbing—from

the time of the two World Wars. In 1990, works from the Fishman collection were shown at the MAM in a major exhibition entitled “From Expressionism to Resistance: Art in Germany 1909–1936.” This show revitalized interest in the period and in many of the all-but-forgotten artists, not only in Milwaukee, but worldwide. The more realistic art that followed the expressionists was now acknowledged as its own art movement, *Neue Sachlichkeit*.

How did this Wisconsin couple without formal training in the history of art manage to create such a sophisticated collection? According to Mary Louise Schumacher of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (October 12, 2009), Janet once said that the answer was simple: art collecting was the only hobby the couple had. It began with a haunting self-portrait by the painter Ludwig Meidner, which gripped the Fishmans when they first saw it. Purchasing that work was a turning

point that focused their interest as collectors on a particular place and time. The portrait was later gifted to the MAM, and it was one of the paintings the Friends had a chance to see during our museum tour.

Curtis Carter described how Marvin and Janet Fishman, with their early gift of dozens of works of art, were instrumental in establishing a new art museum at Marquette University in 1984. More was added later, including works by artists Georg Grosz, August Dressler, Julius Huther, Ludwig Meidner, Max Oppenheimer, and others. After Marvin Fishman’s death, the couple’s remaining collection was passed on to their heirs, who sold it throughout the world. Dr. Carter expressed regret that this historically significant and unique collection was not kept together in one place. The advantage, however, is that we can enjoy the works in many different venues today, including here in Wisconsin at Milwaukee’s MAM and the Haggerty Museum.

We are grateful to John Pustejovsky, President of the Friends, for organizing such a wonderfully informative and enjoyable day in Milwaukee. 🎨



Members of the Friends marvel at *Self Portrait in Yellow*, a work by American artist Tony Oursler

Three New Members for the Friends Board of Directors

Antje Petty

At their annual business meeting on May 7, the Friends elected three new members to the Board of Directors for the 2017–2020 term: Joshua Brown, Kay Gruling, and Todd Michalek. In addition, Fran Luebke was elected to a second term.

Joshua Brown is Associate Professor of German at the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire, where he focuses his research on the Pennsylvania Dutch language. He is also currently the editor of the Transnational German Studies listserv housed at H-Net (Humanities and Social Sciences Online). In 2014, he received the Teacher of Excellence Award from the American Association of Teachers of German, the Goethe

Institut, and the German Embassy in Washington, D.C. In the spring, Josh participated in the Max Kade Institute’s symposium “People of Faith, Voices of Tradition” with a presentation on “Heritage Language, Literature, and Literacy.” As a Board member, Josh wishes to build bridges between university scholars and researchers outside of academia. He feels strongly about encouraging outreach programs that appeal to both academic and public audiences, thus supporting a concept that lies at the core of the MKI’s mission of research, outreach, and collaboration.

Kay Gruling is a family physician and lives in Wausau, Wisconsin. She received her medical degree from the University of Wisconsin–



Todd Michalek

Madison and, as an undergraduate, spent a year at Friedrich-Wilhelms University in Bonn, Germany, where she perfected her German. Hailing from a long line of immigrants from Pomerania in Marathon and Lincoln Counties, Kay grew up hearing *Pommersch* Low-German at home, which instilled in her a life-long interest in German heritage and local/regional culture. She and her husband, Tim Buttke, live on the family farm first homesteaded by Tim’s ancestors in 1858 and have passed their interest in the area’s history on to their children. Their daughter, Calla, graduated from UW–Madison in 2016 with a triple major in Chinese, East Asian Studies, and German, having completed her senior honors thesis with former MKI Co-Director, Cora Lee Kluge. Isaac, their son,



Kay Gruling, left, and her daughter, Calla Buttke

is minoring in German at UW–Madison and will study abroad in Vollendar, Germany, this coming fall. Kay has been active in the local and statewide community. She not only belongs to the *Pommerscher Verein* of Central Wisconsin, but also has been involved in the Wausau School District, Trinity Lutheran Church in Stettin, the Aspirus Health Foundation, Wisconsin Singers, and UW–Medical Alumni Association. In addition, Kay is a fierce advocate for the University of Wisconsin.

Todd Michalek holds a B.A. in Political Science from Marquette University and an MBA from the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. In 2009 he retired from Kohl’s Department Stores after 33 years of service as a Systems Analyst at the company’s corporate headquarters in Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin. Living in South Milwaukee, Todd now

pursues his interest in languages, international culture, and history. He speaks French, Swedish, and American Sign Language and is actively engaged in numerous community organizations. Todd joined the Institute of World Affairs at UWM in 1988, is a member of SOKOL Milwaukee (Czech), the Polish Heritage Alliance, the Italian Community Center, the Swedish American Historical Society of Wisconsin, the Nordic Council of Milwaukee, the Pabst Mansion, Historic Milwaukee, the Milwaukee County Historical Society, and the South Milwaukee Historical Society. In 2015, Todd became a Life Member of the Friends of the Max Kade Institute. He is enthusiastic about promoting multi-national and multi-ethnic history and culture in Wisconsin through the interdisciplinary work of the

Institute.

At a brief Board meeting after the business meeting the following officers were elected: John Pustejovsky (President), Hans Bernet (Vice President), Pamela Tesch (Secretary), and Steven Geiger (Executive Board member at large).

The MKI staff looks forward to another great year of collaboration with the Friends and extends a heartfelt “welcome on Board” to the new Board members. 🦋



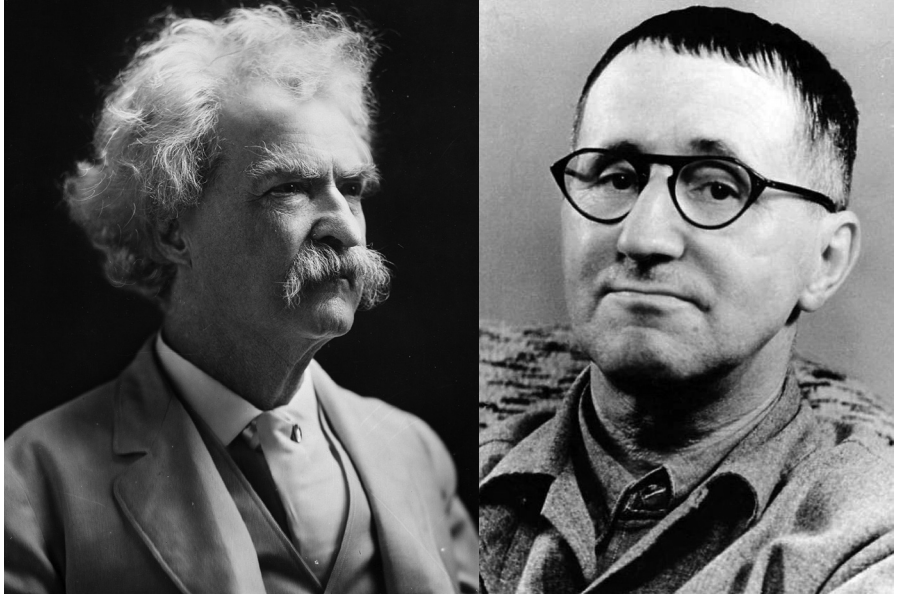
Joshua Brown teaching a class at UW–Eau Claire

Mark Twain's "Magnanimous-Incident" Hero and Bertolt Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan*

Cora Lee Kluge

A short, 2300-word essay by Mark Twain with the awkward title "About Magnanimous-Incident Literature" was published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in May of 1878. In it the narrator presents a series of four anecdotes recounting high-minded and noble deeds, sentimental literature that praises virtuous, generous, and benevolent individuals. The narrator claims that such stories in the past have taught him a lesson, given him pleasure, and brought back his self-respect whenever he thought meanly of mankind. With this essay, he takes them beyond their happy climaxes to focus on their sequels or results.

The first anecdote, "The Grateful Poodle," tells of a dog with a broken leg who was healed by a benevolent physician—"who had read the books"—and who then passed his good fortune forward by bringing another broken-legged dog for treatment, each of whom then brought an additional dog, and so forth, until the physician was completely overwhelmed by the claims upon his services. The situation is described in detail: "the human spectators...the cries of the wounded, the songs of the healed brutes...the traffic...interrupted" and so on. The physician hired assistant surgeons but nevertheless was besieged beyond his capacity and was forced to conclude that he had been "fooled by the books," which "only tell the pretty part of the story, and then



stop." He went out with his shotgun (whose purpose is not stated), by chance stepping on the tail of the original poodle, who then bit him. This poodle, unfortunately, had been "[driven] mad" with "enthusiasm" because of the "great and good work which [he] had been engaged in"; and in the end the benevolent physician died of "hydrophobia" (= rabies). The situation had become a catastrophe not only for the benevolent physician, but also for the grateful poodle, both of whom had been attempting to do virtuous work.

The second anecdote, "The Benevolent Author," relates how a generous celebrated author helped a destitute young writer by editing one of his manuscripts and succeeding in getting it published. The literary novice continued to request and receive the author's assistance with additional

manuscripts—a labor that Twain describes as "plow[ing] through [the] papers, removing unnecessary flowers and digging up some acres of adjective-stumps." The author was surprised, "because in the books the young struggler had needed but one lift, apparently"; but he found himself permanently burdened with aiding the beginner. A final blow came when the young writer became famous—for a work in which he described the author's private life in "blistering detail," which "broke the celebrated author's heart with mortification." Dying, the author concluded "The books deceived me; they do not tell the whole story" and declared "Whom God sees fit to starve, let not man presumptuously rescue to his own undoing."

The third anecdote, "The Grateful Husband," tells of William Ferguson,

who saved the lives of Mr. McSpadden's wife and son when they were involved in a carriage accident. McSpadden rewarded William and promised him help if ever he should need it. William did need help: a better job, a place for his mother to live in the McSpaddens' home, together with her three younger children, one of whom destroyed a lot of the McSpaddens' valuable furniture and then broke his neck falling down the stairs. Seventeen relatives showed up for the child's funeral, all with requests for assistance. William's mother drank and swore, and the McSpaddens undertook to reform her, out of gratitude for William's good deed. Then William wanted to go to college, and next he needed a vacation in Europe for his health. McSpadden had finally had enough and refused, to the shock of William's entire family. They accused McSpadden of ingratitude, and William's mother complained that her little son had died "in the service of such a reptile!" But he threw them all out, stating: "I was beguiled by the books, but shall never be beguiled again..." And turning to William he shouted, "Yes, you did save my wife's life, and the next man that does it shall die in his tracks." Incidentally, Twain insists that this episode is based upon a real incident.

The fourth anecdote is a paragraph directly quoted from an article by Noah Brooks, friend, close associate, and biographer of Abraham Lincoln, which appeared in the March 1878 issue of *Scribner's Monthly*. Here one reads of an actor named J. H. Hackett, whose performance as Falstaff Lincoln praised, thanking him in a personal letter. The actor responded

by sending him a book and followed up with several notes. Then, to Lincoln's distress, Hackett asked to be sent as consul to London—an unbelievable and upsetting request in Lincoln's view. In these four anecdotes, Twain shows how people abuse the kindness, gratitude, and generosity of others and what the consequences can be. But his point is not merely that good deeds can boomerang, that they are not always a good idea, that we may regret even having done them. Instead, the target of his criticism, as is mentioned in each episode, is "the books," which deceive us into thinking that we should lead lives governed by magnanimity.

Though this essay is not among the most familiar of Twain's short works today, it was reprinted often in the years immediately following its original publication, both in English and in other languages; and its popularity persisted over many decades. It appeared in German in the *New-Yorker Belletristisches Journal* the same month it was first published; a Swedish translation by August Strindberg was included in an 1878 collection of American humor; it was published in somewhat abbreviated form in September of that year in the *Queanbeyan Age* in New South Wales; and it was quickly anthologized in English-language collections of Twain's short stories. At least five additional translations into German can be found; and we must conclude that it was familiar to German readers.

I argue that Bertolt Brecht was one of the German readers who paid attention to Twain's essay. Though scholars have not investigated a possible connection between Twain and Brecht, there is evidence that Brecht

knew and respected the work of the American writer. He included Twain's name in a list of authors he recommended for a library for the German Democratic Republic's *Nationale Volksarmee*; his library, now held at the Brecht-Weigel-Gedenkstätte in Berlin, contains several volumes of Twain's works; and Twain's "About Magnanimous-Incident Literature" was almost certainly the source of the overarching theme of his famous play *The Good Person of Szechwan*, namely, the problems inherent in trying to live according to the gods' commandments and the so-called Golden Rule that prescribes magnanimity. Shen Te, the heroine of Brecht's play, like Twain's physician, author, and husband, as well as President Lincoln, wanted to keep the gods' commandments and live a life guided by hospitality and benevolence. However, like Twain's figures, she discovers problems. Put very simply, she found it impossible to be good ("Gut zu sein"), while also continuing to survive ("und doch zu leben").

There is surprising congruity between the second scene in Brecht's play and Twain's third anecdote. Like the generous but exploited Mr. McSpadden, who finds himself supporting fully twenty-two members of the Ferguson family, Shen Te, who lives in a small tobacco shop, finds herself burdened with several named guests, in addition to innumerable others, including a family of eight, in-laws, cousins, and their friends, until her place of business is full of people sleeping everywhere. She unhesitatingly provides rice for Mrs. Shin and her children, even though hunger is the only basis for their claim to assistance. She offers an elderly couple

and their nephew a place to stay, even though they had turned her out in the past. An unemployed man receives cigarettes, and relatives of the first guests are taken into her house, and then more relatives, though none of them have any legitimate right to her kindness. Instead of expressing gratitude, the recipients of her generosity begin to complain that the place is becoming crowded. As in Twain's anecdotes, Shen Te's first act of kindness results in additional demands being made, until the situation gets out of hand. One of Shen Te's beneficiaries advises: "Never recognize a claim, justified or not, or in two minutes you'll be swamped with claims, justified or not." The benevolent figures in Twain's four anecdotes would agree with this recommendation, as their generosity had also led to abuse.


Variations on this theme appear more than once in the writings of both Twain and Brecht. In two of Twain's earlier pieces, "The Story of the Bad Little Boy that Bore a Charmed Life" and "The Story of the Good Little Boy Who Did Not Prosper," he had already pointed out that there is no cause-and-effect connection between good or bad deeds and the rewards or punishments they reap. In "About Magnanimous-Incident Literature," he attacks the time-honored ethical and moral teachings we have long believed in and tried to follow, arguing that they fool and deceive us, that things do not work this way. Similarly, Brecht is arguing against the biblical commandments, stating that though we would like to be guided by principles of hospitality, generosity, and altruism, this results in being exploited and driven to financial ruin. As Shen Te protests: "I'd

like to be good of course, but how am I to pay my rent? ... Even when I break only a *few* of the commandments, I can hardly survive." She has assessed her situation correctly: Shen Te, the "good person," quickly reaches the point where she must send for her "cousin," the hard-hearted businessman Shui Ta, who appears to prevent further damage and set things on the right course again.

In the posthumously published Me-ti aphorisms that carry the heading "Condemnation of Ethical Codes," Brecht returns to this discussion, suggesting an alternative to the traditional teachings. Specifically, acts of generosity should be judged by their usefulness, and people should think of their own well-being. The fourth aphorism is a contorted, double-negative statement that reads like a commentary to the problems of both Mr. McSpadden and Shen Te:

Concerning the famous maxim "love your neighbor as yourself," Me-ti once said: If the workers do that, they will never get rid of the situation where they can only love their neighbor if they do not love themselves.

As both Twain and Brecht have shown, one cannot live by "the books," the commandments, and the Golden Rule, and these traditional moral precepts are not viable as a mandate for our behavior. The moral teachings prescribed by traditional stories of magnanimity and altruism are neither as simple nor as straightforward as we have been led to believe. Taking the discussion even further, some recent thinkers have

considered the problems of applying such ethical precepts on the societal level or in the realm of international business and economic policy. Twain's short essay seems to have migrated across national and linguistic borders to take root, find expression, and spawn further developments far from its original milieu. 

NOTE

A different version of this essay appeared in the *Brecht Yearbook*, vol. 40 (2016); and still another version was given as a lecture at the Philadelphia symposium of the Society for German-American Studies (April 2017).

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