Cyril de Beun

**Werfel, Franz (1890–1945)**

Franz Werfel, born in the city of Prague, was an Austrian-Bohemian novelist, poet, playwright, essayist and translator of Jewish descent. During the 1920s and 1930s, he became a widely read author in the German-speaking region, being awarded several prizes (e.g. the *Grillparzer Prize* in 1926). His novels contributed most to his popularity, although he valued his poetry more highly than his prose.

Werfel’s early activities – between 1911 and the beginning of the First World War – as a poet and as an editor of the Kurt Wolff publishing house in Leipzig (from 1912 onward) made him an important spokesperson of literary expressionism. At Kurt Wolff, he co-edited the expressionist brochure series *Der jüngste Tag* (*The Youngest Day*). His first verse collections marked Werfel’s fame as an expressionist poet. The psychoanalytical theories of Otto Gross inspired the young Franz Werfel, who repeatedly incorporated segments of Gross’s personal life in his work. During his stay in Leipzig, he also became acquainted with, for example, Rainer Maria Rilke, Walter Hasenclever and Kurt Pinthus. The latter would include various poems by Werfel in his poetry anthology *Menschheitsdämmerung* (*Dawn of Humanity*, 1919), a classic of literary expressionism.

At the outbreak of the First World War, Werfel was conscripted into the Austro-Hungarian army. Active service did not prevent him from writing poetry and producing his first genuine stage play, an adaptation of Euripides’s *The Trojan Women* (1915, first performed in 1916). In addition, he propagated pacifist ideas in his writings and speeches.

The most productive phase in Werfel’s career as a prose writer extended from *Verdi: Roman der Oper* (*Verdi: A Novel of the Opera*, 1924) to *Stern der Ungeborenen* (*Star of the Unborn*, finished in 1945, published posthumously in 1946). In *Verdi: A Novel of the Opera*, Werfel created a sharp philosophical contrast between Verdi and Wagner, a comparison that clearly turned out in favour of the former. The best-selling novel sparked a Verdi-revival in interwar Germany. *Die vierzig Tage des Musa Dagh* (*The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, 1933) is a historical novel recounting the events that preceded the Armenian Genocide. As an influential document thematising expulsion and extermination, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* has often been retrospectively interpreted as a grim prefiguration of the Holocaust.

Following the *Anschluss* of Austria (1938), Werfel fled the country with his wife Alma (the widow of Gustav Mahler) and her daughter Anna Mahler. They eventually settled in France, but the French defeat against Germany in 1940 forced Werfel to move to the USA. Among his works produced in exile, *Das Lied von Bernadette* (*The Song of Bernadette*, 1941) proved to be the most successful. The novel, narrating the life of Saint Bernadette Soubirous, was turned into a film in 1943. After having suffered from strokes in the years before, Franz Werfel died in Beverly Hills in 1945.

Recurring motifs in Werfel’s work are the combination of myths and everyday life as well as the spiritual connection of Christ and Israel. Werfel hovered between Judaism and Catholicism for his entire life, often combining a messianic style with visions of human brotherhood. He also mythologised the conflict between father and son, a theme typical of expressionism. His later work, finally, frequently deals with the Italian opera and the link between music and poetry.

**References and Further Reading**

*Friend of the World* (1911, poetry; selection in *Poems*)

*The Trojan Women* (1914/1915, play, first performed 1916; no translation)

*Each Other* (1915, poetry; selection in *Poems*)

*Judgment Day* (1919, poetry; selection in *Poems*)

*Not the Murderer* (1920, novella; in *Twilight of a World*)

*Goat Song* (1921, play, first performed 1922)

*Verdi: A Novel of the Opera* (1924)

*Juarez and Maximilian* (1924, play, first performed 1925)

*Paul among the Jews* (1926, play)

*The Man Who Conquered Death* (1928, novella; also in *Twilight of a World*)

*Class Reunion* (1928, novel; also in *Twilight of a World*)

*The Pure in Heart* (1929, novel)

*The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* (1933, novel)

*The Eternal Road* (1935, oratorio, first performed 1937)

*Embezzled Heaven* (1939, novel)

*The Song of Bernadette* (1941, novel)

*Jacobowsky and the Colonel* (1944, play)

*Star of the Unborn* (posthumously, 1946, novel)

Werfel, F. (1948-1975) Ed. A.D. Klarmann. *Gesammelte Werke*, Stockholm: Bermann-Fischer/Frankfurt am Main: Fischer/Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp/Munich: Langen-Müller. (collected works in German)

Werfel, F. (1989-1997) Ed. K. Beck. *Gesammelte Werke in Einzelbänden*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp. (collected works in German)

Werfel, F. (1945) Trans. E.A. Snow. *Poems*, Princeton: Princeton University Press. (selected poems 1908-1938, with foreword by Werfel; English translation)

Pinthus, K. (Ed., 1994) Trans. J.M. Ratych, R. Ley & R.C. Conard. *Dawn of Humanity: A Document of Expressionism*, Columbia: Camden. (Pinthus’s famous collection of expressionist poetry; English translation)

Werfel, F. (1937) Trans. H.T. Lowe-Porter. *Twilight of a World*, New York: Viking. (short story collection, with essay written by Werfel serving as introduction; English translation)

Werfel, F. (1944) Trans. M. Newmark. *Between Heaven and Earth*, New York: Philosophical Library. (collection of essays, speeches, prose fragments, draft texts and more; English translation)

Huber, L. (Ed., 1989) *Franz Werfel: An Austrian Writer Reassessed*, Oxford: Berg.

Jungk, P.S. (1990) Trans. A. Hollo. *Franz Werfel: A Life in Prague, Vienna and Hollywood*, New York: Grove Weidenfeld.

Spalek, J.M. & S.H. Hawrylchak. (2009) *Franz Werfel: Bibliography of German Editions*, Munich: Saur.

Steiman, L.B. (1985) *Franz Werfel: The Faith of an Exile: From Prague to Beverly Hills*, Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Wagener, H. (1993) *Understanding Franz Werfel*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.

(if you find the list of collected and secondary works too long, please remove Beck, Huber, Spalek and Steiman)

**Paratextual material**

Article on Werfel in *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*: <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Werfel_Franz> (also contains interesting images)

Entry on Werfel in the *Holocaust Encyclopedia* of the *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*: <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007049> (including interesting images)

Data sheet of the *Deutsche Nationalbibliothek* (*German National Library*) containing a large variety of information on Werfel (e.g. publications, including recordings, and relations to organisations and to other people): <http://d-nb.info/gnd/118631373>

Entry on Werfel in the *Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv* (*German Radio Archive*) containing his radio appearances in the Weimar Republic: <http://www.dra.de/rundfunkgeschichte/schriftsteller/autoren.php?buchst=W&aname=Franz%20Werfel>

The *Österreichische Mediathek* (*Austrian Multimedia Library*), a digital archive for sound and video, contains several recordings of and on Werfel:

Werfel reading *Der schöne strahlende Mensch* (*The Beautiful Radiant Human Being*, own translation; from his collection *Friend of the World*; 1931, presumably one of the appearances in the entry of the *German Radio Archive*, cf. supra): <http://www.mediathek.at/atom/136BAB05-12F-02CD0-00000904-136AFAF1>; and one identical recording from 1944: <http://www.mediathek.at/atom/132DCA55-07B-00A35-00000478-132D043B>

Werfel speaking his *Gruß an Norwegen* (*Salutation to Norway*, own translation; from his collection *Between Heaven and Earth*; 1941, Boston Radio): <http://www.mediathek.at/atom/017831E6-3D1-018FE-00000BEC-01772EE2>

Johannes Urzidil (writer and friend of Werfel’s) speaking about his personal relationship with Werfel (1965, Klagenfurt Radio, in German): <http://www.mediathek.at/atom/097C9E6E-00F-00110-00000E40-097BD053>

Lecture by and interview with Friedrich Torberg (writer and friend of Werfel’s; 1976, in German): <http://www.mediathek.at/atom/01782BFB-1BC-00FA7-00000BEC-01772EE2>

Lecture by Eduard Goldstücker (Germanist; 1976, in German): <http://www.mediathek.at/atom/03F71950-2D8-00064-00000A34-03F68855>

Images: please see following pdf files in attachment:

“Entry REM Franz Werfel images Jobst-Rieder”: Werfel alone and Werfel delivering his speech *Von der reinsten Glückseligkeit des Menschen* (*Of Man’s True Happiness*, 1937; from his collection *Between Heaven and Earth*); source: M. Jobst-Rieder. (1990) *Franz Werfel: 1890-1945: Ausstellung der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek*, Vienna: Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, between p.102-103.

“Entry REM Franz Werfel images Jungk”: Werfel together with Gerhart Hauptmann and Werfel together with his wife Alma Mahler-Werfel (last picture also in *Holocaust Encyclopedia*); source: P.S. Jungk. (1987) *Franz Werfel: Eine Lebensgeschichte*, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer.