

Walter Mehring pays tribute to his dead friends in a New Year's poem, 1940/41¹

Poem by Walter Mehring,² 31 December 1940

Part I: Odyssey out of Midnight X³ – Marseilles, New Years 1940/41

On the door of my hut, the New Year pounds
 A dozen times, and in hollowed tone
 Of doom intones: 'These too are gone ...'
 Hangs up a wreath and passes on his rounds.
 The colors pale, plagued by the blight of lies.
 Starved for the truth, the season token dies.
 The richest fruitage in the season's yield
 Was left to rot upon a German field.

Muehsam,⁴ poet, firm promethean,
 Was strangled, like a sick unwanted hound.
Ossietzky,⁵ flung and flayed upon the ground,
 Smiled and died, a proud unbeaten man.
 He, having won the prize of Peace now gave
 His gain to Death for peace within the grave.
 The finest fruitage in the season's yield
 Was left to rot upon a German field.

A letter flutters down; the script is blurred;
 'Stupidities we once so roundly jeered
 Fashion us history. And they are feared,
 Applauded and bespeak the final word ...

1 Translation from German published in Walter Mehring, *No Road Back: Poems. English and German Text*, trans. S. A. De Witt, illus. George Grosz (New York: Samuel Curl, 1944), pp. 77–83. The poem is one of twelve 'Midnight Letters' (*Briefe aus der Mitternacht*).

2 Walter Mehring (1896–1981), writer, publicist, translator, and illustrator; co-founder of the political cabarets of Berlin, 1920; correspondent for *Die Weltbühne*, in Berlin and Paris, 1922–1928; journalist in Vienna, 1934–1938; fled to France after the Anschluss, and emigrated to the United States in 1941; returned to Europe in 1953, living first in Germany, then in Switzerland.

3 The 'Twelve Midnight Letters' are numbered.

4 Erich Mühsam (1878–1934), writer; worked at the weekly journal *Simplicissimus* from 1909; editor of the monthly journal *Kain: Zeitschrift für Menschlichkeit*, 1911–1914 and 1918–1919; played a leading role in the proclamation of the socialist Bavarian Council Republic in 1919, and thereafter was sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment; released in 1924; arrested by the SA in 1933, and murdered in Oranienburg concentration camp.

5 Carl von Ossietzky (1889–1938), publicist; from 1927 editor-in-chief of the weekly journal *Die Weltbühne*; imprisoned in Sonnenburg concentration camp in 1933; awarded the 1936 Nobel Peace Prize *in absentia*; died in a Berlin hospital as a result of mistreatment in the camp.

Forget ... *Tucholsky*. ...⁶ Then the Midnight Sun
Lit the fierce drink whereby he fell, self-done.
The richest fruitage of⁷ the season's yield
Was left to rot upon a foreign field.

Then *Ernst Toller*,⁸ companion since my youth,
Enriching everything he touched ... the stage ...
The gatherings of earnest folk ... even the cage
That prisoned him ... crusader for the truth ...
Snuffed himself out under an alien sky
Far from the battle. We still wonder why ...
The richest fruitage of the season's yield
Was left to rot upon a foreign field. ...

In all this world there never was an inn
Quite like the one near Luxembourg, where we
Mixed Left and Right precept and policy,
While *Joseph Roth*⁹ played master mind and Djinn.
A bearded prophet with a wine-drenched breath
Who very sagely drank himself to death.
The richest fruitage of the season's yield
Was left to rot upon a German field.

Just before our Paris fell, and I,
Released from jail discovered you again,
The exiled *Ernst Weiss*¹⁰ tarried with us then,
Poet and surgeon, he knew how one should die.
He mixed himself a bane and quaffed it down
Before the croaking Huns flew into town. ...
The richest fruitage in the season's yield
Was left to rot upon a foreign field.

6 Kurt Tucholsky (1890–1935), journalist, writer, and literary critic; worked for the journal *Die Schaubühne* (later renamed *Die Weltbühne*), 1913–1933; Paris correspondent for the *Weltbühne* and the *Vossische Zeitung* from 1924; emigrated in 1930 to Sweden, where he committed suicide.

7 The inconsistent use of 'in' and 'of' in the refrain is present in the original text.

8 Ernst Toller (1893–1939), writer; played a leading role in the proclamation of the socialist Bavarian Council Republic in 1919, and thereafter was sentenced to five years' imprisonment; was stripped of German citizenship and emigrated to Switzerland, 1933; emigrated to Britain in 1934 and later to the United States, where he took his own life.

9 Joseph Roth (1894–1939), writer and journalist; from 1923 culture correspondent for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, then its foreign correspondent in Paris, 1925–1929; emigrated to Paris in 1933.

10 Dr Ernst Weiss (1882–1940), writer, literary critic, and physician; worked for the *Berliner Börsen-Courier*; emigrated to Paris via Prague, 1933; committed suicide as German troops approached Paris.

The philosophic *Lessing*,¹¹ tried and slain,
And *Hasenclever*,¹² steeped in French esprit,
Dead in a French Dachau; grim comedy!
Carl Einstein,¹³ dreaming of a newborn Spain
Caught and hanged, a wild bird winged in flight. ...
While *Olden*¹⁴ drowned with Canada in sight. ...
The richest fruitage of the season's yield
Was left to rot upon a foreign field.

Now *Horvarth*,¹⁵ crushed beneath a stricken tree,
Cheated fate and exile: far too fine
A gem to lie before rapacious swine,
He died ... a satyr-being, wildly free ...
Twelve times the door is pounded; and it creaks.
Eleven are gone. And now the Reaper speaks:
The richest fruitage of the season's yield
Was left to rot upon a German field.

Within this hut, where days drag laggardly,
You in New York, and I in drab Marseilles,
Eking along on loans from day to day,
Munching on the sapless stuff of memory.
I bide the call to join the dead Eleven,
In some hard nether world, or gentler heaven.
The richest fruitage of the season's yield
Was left to rot upon a foreign field.

If one high boon were granted, I would dare
Command this New Year's Eve to carry here

11 Dr Theodor Lessing (1872–1933), philosopher and publicist; adjunct professor at the Hanover Institute of Technology; worked for the dailies *Prager Tagblatt* and *Dortmunder Generalanzeiger*; emigrated in 1933 to Mariánské Lázně (Marienbad) in Czechoslovakia, where he died after an assassination attempt by Sudeten German Nazis; author of works including *Der jüdische Selbsthass* (Jewish Self-Hatred) (1930).

12 Walter Hasenclever (1890–1940), writer; Paris correspondent for the *8-Uhr-Abendblatt*, 1924–1938; after 1933 lived in Yugoslavia, Britain, Italy, and the south of France; took his own life as German troops approached the Les Milles internment camp.

13 Carl Einstein (1885–1940), writer and art critic; emigrated to Paris in 1928; fought in the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1938; interned in France, 1940, and took his own life after his release, as German troops approached.

14 Rudolf Olden (1885–1940), journalist, lawyer, and historian; politics editor at the *Berliner Tageblatt*, 1924–1933; defence counsel at political trials in Berlin, including that of Carl von Ossietzky; emigrated to Czechoslovakia, 1933, and to Britain, 1934; died en route to the United States when his ship was torpedoed by a German submarine.

15 Ödön von Horváth (1901–1938), writer and playwright; worked for the satirical weekly *Simplicissimus*; emigrated to Austria in 1933, then to Switzerland in 1938; killed on the Champs-Élysées in Paris by a falling branch during a storm.

Your living presence, firm, and sweet, and near;
That every nerve of mine twang quick and bare.
How I would breathe and sense you utterly,
while love's deliriant potion heightened me.
But, ah, this wine I sip, tastes of the dead,
Pressed from a vintage, never harvested.