

**In a poem composed in September 1940, the writer Walter Mehring
records his experiences in St Cyprien internment camp in the south of France¹**

'Odyssey out of Midnight VII (Camp St. Cyprien, September 1940)', poem by Walter Mehring²

My dreams are hexed with ardent errantry;
But a hedge of cattle wire encircles me. ...
I cannot ride to you. Like stone I stand
Irresolutely on the loamy sand. ...
Only the clouds move on. A fervent wind
Heats up the blood impatient time has thinned.
I paused to search the heavens for your face,
And found myself imprisoned in this place.

Again I dream how in a thousand stalls,
Cattle herds are packed to bulge the walls;
A phantasy where beast and human clod
Alike are imaged with the face of God.
But caught within a witch's trancing spell
And fenced in tautly by these barbs, no hell
Designed for the foulest deeps of infamy,
Has held such beasts and bestiality.

On every side they loll and prod and peer ...
Here they lurk, and there they smirk and leer ...
Their mouths are shaped to imbecilic grins;
Their faces pocked by the scourge of nameless sins. ...
Lemur masks on elongated necks,
Make up a curious play with tears and becks:
Demonic pantomime ... until it seems
You too are part of all these depthless dreams.

I grope about within the clammy fold
Among the bodies strewn on hay and mold ...
The starved flesh fevers and exudes a sweat;
This human mist, acidulously wet,

1 Published in Walter Mehring, *No Road Back: Poems by Walter Mehring*, trans. S. A. De Witt (New York: Samuel Curl, 1944), pp. 55–61.

2 Walter Mehring (1896–1981), writer, translator, and illustrator; composed texts and chansons for the Berlin cabaret theatre; correspondent for *Die Weltbühne* in Berlin and Paris, 1921–1924; emigrated to France in 1933; journalist in Vienna, 1934–1938; interned in the Falaise camp in Normandy, Sept. 1939–Feb. 1940, then worked as a translator in Paris; fled to the south of France in June 1940; arrested in Perpignan; confined for two months in St Cyprien camp; emigrated to the USA in Feb. 1941; returned to Germany in 1953; spent his final years in Switzerland.

Keeps rising and corrodes the very air. ...
A rat I graze in passing, halts to stare
At my intrusion, then resumes its round
For food, despite a sentry and his hound.

Within a sudden flash, I see them all
Again. Just where and how? Ah ... I recall
When these made up the play ... 'Society' ...
Bright patrons of the arts ... in library,
At concert hall, and writer's ball, they made
The world of progress strutting on parade.
Sad mockery! The savants might at least
Have known why man preferred to be a beast.

Driven out in pairs by push and blow,
We balk at slaving but like slaves we go ...
We fret and squabble over sticky stew;
We sleep with plagues; and those who will not brew
The rancid water, yield to thirst instead ...
And in the dawn these lie among the dead. ...
All this I see and know ... and it is vain
To drug the wrack and terror in my brain.

My visions range about a dungeon cell
With Europe flung therein ... and guarded well.
The dreams expand: the treachery of France
Blots out the date of all deliverance.
And thanks to spies and slick 'La Surêté'³
The Sorbonne toasts its own awaited Day.
All rights of refuge raped, I mark how we
Are packed in cells to find equality.

All this a dream? Ah no, the truth we see
Is fashioned out of sickened phantasy. ...
Three days I hid in holes at Perpignan
With loafing bibbers. On the walls I'd scan
The curses scrawled by those who fought and lost
Their red, resurgent Spain. Now caught and tossed
Again behind barbed wire, these days I dwell
In what is named the Pyrenean Hell.

3 Accent incorrect in original. This is a reference to the French Sûreté nationale, which oversaw all the police departments in France, with the exception of the Paris Police Prefecture, from 1934/35 until the creation of the Police nationale in 1941.

St. Cyprien⁴ ... Ilot Spécial,⁵ they call
Our prison camp. With what satanic gall
This torture hole was planned! A stroke of a pen
Dipped deep in hate can damn free living men
To perish in a bottomless despair.
We weep ... we shriek ... deliver us! Oh where
Are saint and Deity? No heart ... no ear!
Four thousand Jews are slowly rotting here.

Again the dream of finding you ... and lo!
Your kisses cover me. Enchanting glow
Pervades me. Now I reach your febrile being
Through the walls of wire, one moment freeing
Every bond and bar within. ... But when
Your laughter fades and I am dragged again
Behind the mesh, I know no word or cry
Will penetrate the steel about this sty.

4 St Cyprien camp on the Spanish border was set up in Feb. 1939 to provide accommodation for refugees arriving from Spain. On the day of the German invasion of Belgium (10 May 1940), the Belgian police arrested 5,000 to 8,000 Jewish refugees with German citizenship and had them taken to St Cyprien. On 4 Oct. 1940 the camp was closed and 3,858 inmates were transferred to Gurs camp in France: see also Doc. 156.

5 French: 'special block'.