The Limits of Cosmopolitanism in the Poetry of Michael Hofmann

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Abstract
The publication in 2013 of The Palm Beach Effect, a book of critical “reflections” on Michael Hofmann, confirmed the importance of this British but German-born poet, translator, and critic. Picking up where some of the contributors to this recent volume left off, this article evaluates a major part of Hofmann’s poetic career through a focus on his cosmopolitanism, and is an attempt to find out what sort of cosmopolitan poet Hofmann has been, at a time when his poetic voice has gone mostly quiet. Hofmann’s poetry is explored on its own terms and through the prism of some recent sociological and other theoretical writing on cosmopolitanism, including the idealistic Europeanist and globalist work of Gerard Delanty.
The investigation begins with a close-read and contextual analysis of the cosmopolitanism of Hofmann’s Nights in the Iron Hotel (1983) and, especially, Acrimony (1986). Though these works deploy a variety of anti-imperial figures, I suggest that their way of using European culture to hold Hofmann’s father, the author Gert Hofmann, to account for the displacement suffered by his poison adds up to a powerfully internalized but ultimately Eurocentric form of cosmopolitanism. The article goes on to contrast this early phase of Hofmann’s writing with the poems of Corona, Corona (1993), with special emphasis on the Mexico-set travel sequence at the end of that book. I argue that it is in the expansively historical and materialist poetry of this later volume—where Hofmann stages a memorably polyglot encounter between local and global forms of capitalism through an awareness of shared yet differently “rooted” inauthenticity—that this writer approaches the limits of his and “British” poetry’s cosmopolitan imagination. A final section considers the drift away from an engagement with the “stranger” (Appiah) in Hofmann’s later books, as well as the implications of his recent poetic silences.

Keywords
Michael Hofmann, British poetry, cosmopolitanism, Eurocentrism, travel writing
“[T]hrillingly, probably for the first time in history, one’s formation as a poet is almost bound to be cosmopolitan nowadays and polyglot, and if it isn’t, it damned well should be” (Hofmann, *Durs Grünbein* vii). These characteristically combative words belong to the German-born, now mostly Florida-based and always only ever tentatively or ambivalently “British” poet, translator, and critic Michael Hofmann. The words appeared in the preface to his English translations of the contemporary German poet Durs Grünbein, which were published in 2005—six years after *Approximately Nowhere* (1999), which, at the time of writing, remains Hofmann’s most recent full-length original poetry collection. In his contribution to the laudatory volume of “reflections” on Hofmann entitled *The Palm Beach Effect* (2013), the authoritative poet-critic David Wheatley remarks on what he calls the “spectacular performative abstentionism” (167) of this poetic silence, which has been interrupted by only a handful of new poems in his 2008 *Selected Poems* and a few more since. The cosmopolitan aspirations of Hofmann’s semi-abandoned poetics resonate elegiacally in Wheatley’s depiction of him as “contemporary poetry’s most flitting and elusive ghost, the white whale of our lost alternative to all that is provincial and small in a tawdry world, our impossible strong enchanter, the man who isn’t there” (169). In this article, in a less mournful key than Wheatley’s, I want to examine what sort of cosmopolitan poet Hofmann might yet be for us.

In his introduction to *The Palm Beach Effect*, Julian Stannard establishes the general contours within which Hofmann’s cosmopolitanism has generally been seen. He points to the way Hofmann’s “literary interests often take us to a European modernist landscape, and are at times drawn to what Iain Sinclair” (xi)—the psycho-geographer and poet associated with the “Cambridge School” of J. H. Prynne—“celebrated in *Conductors of Chaos* [Sinclair’s 1996 anthology of late modernist poetry] as the ‘remote, alienated, [and] fractured’” (xi). At the same time, however, Stannard seems to accept the observation of one of the book’s contributors, Jamie McKendrick, that Hofmann’s “resolute use of the ‘lyric I’” (Stannard x) places him at odds with Prynne’s Paul Celan-influenced late modernist poetics. And Stannard approvingly quotes Stephen Romer’s view that Hofmann was “central in establishing the anecdotal—anathema in some quarters—‘as a mode, perhaps the mode, of *fin de siècle* mainstream British poetry’” (Stannard xi;
emphasis in original). These cultural co-ordinates are helpful. But it is important that concerns with poetic schools and other affiliations should not obscure whatever psychological, cultural, and political insights have come from Hofmann’s simultaneously alien and familiar British mode—from a “voice” that should not be imagined as dehistoricized or straightforwardly “authentic” in the way that the label “lyric ‘I’” often implies.

**A Family Affair: Hofmann’s Early Cosmopolitanism**

Both Hofmann’s aspirations to cosmopolitanism and the falling quiet of his poetic voice cannot be fruitfully discussed without reference to a perennial though occasionally covert theme of his 1980s and 1990s volumes. This subject is Gert Hofmann, the poet’s late father, an itinerant literature professor and the author of many highly acclaimed and often darkly fabular post-war novels in German, including *Auf dem Turm* (1982) (translated by Christopher Middleton as *The Spectacle of the Tower* [1985]), which won the Alfred-Döblin-Preis, and several others that Michael Hofmann himself has undertaken to translate. In an interview with Stephen Knight published in the British newspaper *The Independent* in 2008 Hofmann suggested that a crucial impulse behind his poetry—the desire to wreak “destruction” (Knight, “Metric Conversion” n. pag.)—disappeared when his father died in 1993, after which, as he is quoted saying, “I physically felt myself become him . . . I don’t have an antagonist. I am in the ring, as it were, but the ring is at peace” (n. pag.; ellipsis added). Hofmann’s first two volumes, *Nights in the Iron Hotel* (1983) and, especially, *Acrimony* (1986), circle around a principal source of the mortal father-son antagonism—namely, Gert Hofmann’s decision, in 1971, to take up an academic post at the University of Ljubljiana in the former Yugoslavia yet have his wife and daughters installed in an anonymous suburb of Klagenfurt in Austria, and the future poet sent to Winchester (the English boarding school) on a scholarship. Thus the family “broke three ways into three unequal parts like Gaul” (“Curried Dragon” n. pag.), as Hofmann puts it in a short prose reminiscence from 2012. As we are about to see, this metaphor takes us back to the beginning of Hofmann’s poetic engagement with cosmopolitanism, where the latter is presented primarily as a condition of internal division and loss—but one out of which Hofmann’s distinctive “voice” is shown to emerge.

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1 For a taste of the “anathema,” we can sample the “Cambridge School” poet Andrew Duncan’s sour labeling of Hofmann and Romer as “‘courtly’ poets” (232) in his entertainingly broad-brush polemic *The Failure of Conservatism in Modern British Poetry*. 
A version of the prose piece’s expressive imagery of imperial dominion and disorder is already in evidence in *Nights in the Iron Hotel*. “The Nomad, My Father” begins, “Fused with your car, a modern centaur, / you commute to work like the Tartar hordes / who swept across Europe, drinking their mares’ milk” (*Nights* 34). This retrospectively—and rather deviously—confers personal significance on a diptych of poems just before it that are ostensibly about the personal and cultural mobility of the “father” of modern German literature, Johann von Goethe. The first of these is “Young Werther,” in which Hofmann’s twentieth-century sighting of Yugoslavian “petrol-pump attendants” (32) wearing the yellow and blue “livery” (32) of Goethe’s suicidal lover-thinker prompts a trans-historical and pan-European vision of revolutionary romanticism metamorphosing first into its imperial opposite (Napoleon) and then into a medley of late twentieth-century adolescent fashion, hedonism, and morbidity:

... your foolish generation of virgins,
who followed you, then Napoleon, in everything.  
*Liebestod* all over Europe, a messy business.  
Did Art ever again affect Life to that degree?  
The unacknowledged legislator of ducks’ tails,  
Beatle-mania, mini-skirts, glue-sniffing,  
snuff movies ... (32; 2nd ellipsis in original)

Anachronistically set against this already belated or proleptic youthful footage is the later Goethe, agent of a type of intercontinental and inter-generational transmission which, like Napoleon’s imperial expansionism, seems designed to serve his own lordly hegemonic interests at the expense of others. In Hofmann’s résumé style of narration—a way of compressing personal and (trans)national history into the inexorable shape of “character”—the love-unto-death that the young Goethe set in motion with his famous novella turns out to have anticipated a fatality in the sphere of his family life:

And over there,  
shining back up the cliff, visibly ageing,  
Goethe on his way to conversations with Eckermann;  
dandling little Bettina—at sixteen no longer  
a child—on his knee; mutual appreciation with  
Lord Byron; a future as an abominable father. (*Nights* 32)
The possibility that this conspicuously elliptical accusation closing “Young Werther” is a significant early thrust in the case against Hofmann’s own border-crossing German author-father is given further credence, albeit still in a poker-faced, allusive manner, in the next poem, “Migrations of an Older Romantic.” Here we find the cosmopolitan Goethe heading opportunistically for the Rhine “Whenever he felt sad” to make “a conquest of one of the maidens” but coming away with songs that were, “in his late manner, drab and pietistic” (33).

The accusatory, even punitive, function of these Goethe-themed poems, with their bathetic-pathetic resizing of a national cultural icon, becomes a lot clearer when they are read in the light of “My Father’s House,” the explicitly autobiographical second half of his next volume, Acrimony. In particular, the linkage between Hofmann’s “Nomad” father and the sexually roaming Goethe receives explicit explanation here. Hofmann, sometimes addressing his still-living father full-on, now relates his memories of living “with you in your half-house in Ljubljiana” (Acrimony 54) and meeting “your girlfriends, short-haired, dark, oral” (54). The mordantly reifying triplet indicates Hofmann’s debt to the great twentieth-century American poet Robert Lowell.

The more broadly thematic influence of Lowell upon Hofmann’s poems in “My Father’s House” arises—as has been widely noted (Warren 66-70; Raine 139)—from the American poet’s performative sequence of reminiscences of his “Boston Brahmin” family and his own adult ruptures in Life Studies (1959). The cosmopolitan potentiality of this model for Hofmann is apparent in Lowell’s adjectivally rich and Oedipal memory of his mother’s voice—“still electric / with a hysterical, unmarried panic, / when she read to me from the Napoleon book” (Lowell 172)—where the grand family’s connection to Napoleon is associative and imposed rather than narrowly historical: “Long-nosed Marie Louise / Hapsburg [the archduchess who married Napoleon in 1810] in the frontispiece / had a downright Boston bashfulness” (172). What Hofmann took from the Lowell of Life Studies, above all, was the sense that the dysfunctional detail of his cosmopolitan experience with his prominent father could have a metonymic authority beyond its therapeutic-seeming occasion; it could matter.

In “My Father’s House,” more than anywhere else in his slim poetic oeuvre, Hofmann makes transnational cultural geography the expressive medium of his resentment toward the philandering patriarch (not) in his life. One of the poems, “Errant,” begins with the Oedipal (and thus Lowellian) conspiratorial message, “In your absence, it’s up to me to be the man of the house, / and listen to the late news with my mother” (68), and depicts mother and son in a shared position of
expectancy while listening to pan-European travel information ("Euro Radio Reise Rufe" [Acrimony 68]): “Missing persons, a sudden illness—/ or any dramatic good news? We both think the same thing: / Gert Hofmann, travelling in Yugoslavia in a silver Audi 100 . . .” (68; ellipsis in original). Juxtaposed but also merging with this ambivalent premonition of his father’s death by misadventure is an enviously beatific boy’s own vision of Gert’s freedom: “Your family safely parked / across the border . . . / you set off, newly bathed, appetizing, dressed in white, / cutting the corners of the mountain passes in your messianic car!” (68; ellipsis in original).

Tartar-like, Goethean or Napoleonic, the plunderer-father fused with his German car embodies an imperial history which, as a result of the several Central and Eastern references in “My Father’s House,” cannot but recall, however tacitly, the messianic attempts at military expansionism in the Nazi era. Cosmopolitanism, in this context, stands for the paralyzed condition of subjection to a distant center but also the potential for resistance to that power through the revival of plural identities. “Withdrawn from Circulation” places the reader in the scene of Hofmann’s late adolescent festering between boarding school and university, an overheated family apartment in West Berlin, with, “It was said” (Acrimony 62), “nothing between here and Siberia—/ except Poland—but indoors was the tropics” (62). The line-break and dash before “except Poland” are significant for the way they rather acridly conjure the Nazis’ hubristic territorial ambitions. No less significant is the phrase “It was said,” expressive as it is of an impersonal and fallible source of power at once peculiar to this family and more widely metonymic. We are shown the destructive local effects of the absent patriarch’s power over his family in the son’s self-comforting, somewhat regressive-sounding way of keeping a makeshift bed together, which the poem makes into an early version of the image of his family breaking “three ways into three unequal parts like Gaul”:

For a whole month, the one soiled bedsheet
was supposed to knit together, to join in matrimony
the shiny blue tripartite mattress, borrowed or looted

from a ruined office, but good as new.
Small wonder I hugged it in sleep! (62)

That this textile symbolism of familial unity-in-division or division-in-unity overlaps with the imagery Hofmann uses to evoke a more general sort of stasis points to the fact that Hofmann is concerned with cosmopolitanism as a personal
and internalized predicament. And that he has used the political word “tripartite,” with its allusion to the 1940 Tripartite, or Berlin, Pact between Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and a colonially expansionist Japan, alerts us both to the accusatory emotion lying just below the surface of this poetic memoir and to the wider cultural arena in which these personal emotions are to be imagined playing out.

The last part of “Withdrawn from Circulation” presents the experience of cosmopolitan self-division as isolating and immobilizing (hence the title) but also as a symptomatic form of resistance in the Oedipal mode that places the eighteen-year-old Hofmann on the side of British (versus German) literature and, temperamentally at least, on the side of the left-wing terrorist Red Army Faction (a.k.a. Baader-Meinhof). In this last scenario, the absent (i.e., also out-of-circulation) father implicitly assumes the position of the West Berlin mayoral candidate Peter Lorenz, who was taken hostage by the 2 June Movement (affiliated with the RAF) in 1975 because of his supposed embodiment of an insufficiently de-Nazified hegemonic establishment:

I picked up just enough politics to frighten my mother.

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Nothing quite touched me.
I put on weight, smoked Players and read Dickens for anchorage and solidity. Come the autumn, I was going to Cambridge. A few doors down was the cellar where the RAF kept the Berlin Senator they had kidnapped and were holding to ransom.

From time to time, his picture appeared in the newspapers, authenticated by other newspapers in the picture with him. He was news that stayed news. (63)

The closing phrase is Ezra Pound’s definition (shifted to the past tense) of poetry, the medium in which Michael Hofmann would begin to challenge his father’s literary hegemony while studying at Cambridge. In fact, the quotation resonates with many other moments in “My Father’s House” at which Hofmann records the birth of a new and, in the context of late twentieth-century British poetry, cosmopolitan version of selfhood as a form of protest against his father’s way of ruling from elsewhere. “Lighting Out” shores up the association of semi-famous Gert Hofmann and the textually authenticated Lorenz with a portrait of the son as a
twenty-something lawnmower salesman “whipping round the green belts in Northern Germany”—“a man alone, travelling— / I was on your territory,” yet “Hardly your line . . . that would have been / a tour of radio stations, or public readings”—encountering Gert in absentia when he proudly bought a copy of “your firstborn, The Denunciation” “on my expenses” (57; ellipsis added). It ends with a memorably self-pitying—and implicitly accusatory—image of the younger Hofmann’s itinerant self-fashioning:

I ran myself
Like an organization, held out the prospect of bonuses,
Wondered which of the tiny, sad, colourful bottles
In my freezing minibar I would crack next. (57)

Earlier in the sequence, “The Machine That Cried” very amusingly and poignantly depicts the pre-adolescent Hofmann’s melancholically resourceful response to being “jettisoned” “into infancy and Englishness” (Acrimony 52), his parents having gone back to Germany without him:

My first ever British accent wavered
Between Pakistani and Welsh. I called Bruce’s record shop
Just for someone to talk to. He said, “Certainly, Madam.”
Weeks later, it was “Yes sir, you can bring your children.”
It seemed I had engineered my own birth in the new country. (53)

Necessity is the mother of invention, the poem seems to say, with an implied moral that the boy’s helplessly hybridized performance of selfhood—one that incorporates the originally US-English “call” instead of “rang” among its travesties—is the expressively realistic response for someone in his predicament. There is a pre-echo in this performance of Hofmann’s comments in an interview he gave for the 2002 volume Talking With Poets, in which he said, “I think you could say that because I write in English and my first four years were spent in Germany and German was originally my first language, everything I write has this shimmer of inauthenticity or anxiety” (Thomas 103). Later in the interview he praised Pound’s translations from Chinese for their “flagrant” declaration of “the inauthenticity of the words” (107), and he defended the use of the British expletive “wanker” in Alan Myers’ translation of the exiled Russian-American poet Joseph Brodsky on the grounds that, “Joseph might have gone for that anyway . . . just from being an opportunist.
And I think you have to be that. Again, it’s sort of an attack on the genuine” (109; ellipsis added). In “My Father’s House,” the evocation of lonely linguistic displacement set in motion by a father—who, rather like the senator Lorenz, is “authenticated” by textual traces rather than (loving) presence—makes Hofmann’s inauthentic selfhood appear bitterly authentic. His boyhood’s unintentional drag act retrospectively reads as one of many heartfelt linguistic attacks on the genuine from which he was excluded.

As we have seen from “Lighting Out,” the paradoxically inauthentic/re-authenticated cosmopolitan “new” can also be of a more demonstrably (yet anxiously) masculine sort in Hofmann’s poetry. In “Vortex,” a memory of the vulnerable state of longing (“permanent readiness”) induced by traveling with his father turns into an assertion of his own adult male way of accommodating himself to impermanence through his rejection of his father’s pompously phallic shaving “gear” (“the stiff brush of real badger” [Acrimony 61]) and through the self-destructive act of smoking:

I was an orphan, a street Arab, waiting for you
in international lounges, at the foot of skyscrapers;
entertaining myself with the sprinkler nozzles
secreted in the ceiling, whirling dervishes
sniffing out smoke, in a state of permanent readiness;
or with the sprung, centrifugal, stainless ashtrays

I light up, a new man. (61)

This is an appropriate moment to consider how Hofmann’s early mode of cosmopolitanism relates to wider currents of cosmopolitan thinking. For taken together, the reference to the violent RAF’s supposedly anti-imperialist struggle, the memory of the metamorphic “British” accent wavering between Pakistani and Welsh, and the just-quoted identification with the figure of the “street Arab” in an agitated key of anticipated emancipation (and self-destruction) raise the question of whether Hofmann’s poetry aspires to a form of cosmopolitanism based on connections extending beyond the European sphere. The sociologist Gerard Delanty defines cosmopolitanism in very broadly descriptive terms as “the multiplicity of ways in which the social world is constructed in different modernities,” before adding more prescriptively, “it should . . . be seen as a cultural medium of societal transformation that is based on the principle of world openness, which is associated
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with global publics” and “created out of the encounter of the local with the global” (27; ellipsis added). No less prescriptive are Carol A. Breckenridge, Sheldon Pollock, Homi K. Bhabha, and Dipesh Chakrabarty. They announce their attempt to “provincialize Europe” (Pollock 6) by expanding “the repertory of archives, geographies, histories, and disciplines” (12) to get beyond “the absolute universalisms of Western cosmopolitanism” (13). How cosmopolitan does Hofmann’s poetry look beside such statements?

It could certainly be argued that a desire to “provincialize” “the West”—or at least one western part of the West and mostly in the negative sense of disparaging it— informs the first half of Acrimony, which is largely set in contemporary (i.e., mid-1980s) Britain. “Eclogue” announces the poet’s alienation from the cultural present and lingering past of his adoptive “home” with an accumulated imagery of abandoned mines and other “dangerous sites” “from the last century,” around which “sheep graze, / horned and bleating like eminent Victorians” (Acrimony 29). Subsequent poems latch on to graffiti and other signifiers of dispiriting parochialism in a general atmosphere of being-superseded: “Arsenal rules the world” (32); “Joy, local, it says in the phone-booth, with a number / next to it. Or Petra. Or Out of Order”; “Old Labour slogans, Venceremos, dates for demonstrations / like passed deadlines—they must be disappointed / to find they still exist” (34). In this context, the Spanish or Portuguese slogan (“We will overcome”; “We will win”) adds pathetically to the post-imperial and post-industrial gloom, but it also announces the rhetorical victory of those prized but rare signs of cultural hybridization or creolization that spring up from Hofmann’s color-drained and sickly London landscape. In “Open House,” for instance, he savors in a post-colonial archival fashion “the drawling vowel ‘r’ of Irish or Jamaican / carrying easily through the heated, excitable air— / as though I lived in a museum without walls” (36). Here the poet is (briefly) the witness to intersecting “transnational movements of people and cultures” (Delanty 33)—a cultural grey zone, to invoke Jan Nederveen Pieterse’s term—dating back to the complex colonial relations of Irish, English, and African in the Caribbean, but with the potential to eclipse the dilapidated center.

2 For readers not familiar with Britain in the mid-1980s, the following explanation is provided: Arsenal is a football (soccer) team with an illustrious past (and future) that failed to win more than one trophy between 1972 and 1986; “Joy” and “Petra” were presumably the names of women or girls selling, or being sold for, sex; in 1986 the leftist British Labour Party had lost two general elections in a row and was about to lose a third.
But, as just mentioned, such engagements with non-Western cultural forms are rare in the first part of Acrimony. And in fact they are rare in Hofmann’s early work as a whole, where they function above all as metaphors within his essentially European psychodramatic relationship with cosmopolitanism. We cannot escape the fact that the cultural matter of a specifically European modernity is central to Hofmann’s first two poetry volumes. His Lowelian family portraits produce a poetic persona which the poet Tony Williams admiringly sums up with the phrase, “a kind of ultra-educated exiled European” (59). As we progress in our reading of Acrimony to the emotional climaxes in “My Father’s House,” European culture provides the “anchorage and solidity” (Acrimony 62) with which to hold the hegemonic and errant father to account from a position of equivalent worldly authority.

This is the case even when—or perhaps especially when, given Hofmann’s père’s own Kafkaesque literary pedigree—Hofmann is engaging with that civilization’s discontents, as he is with his translated reference to the title of Austro-Hungarian Expressionist author Ödön von Horváth’s anti-Nazi novella Jugend ohne Gott (1937) in Acrimony’s most beautiful single lyric, “Catechism.” Here, a lineally foregrounded phrase, “reading Horváth’s Godless Youth” (Acrimony 70), has a material cultural stolidity that is related to the European Bildungsroman notion that humanist adult wisdom is acquired through an immersion in the turbulent experiences of youth. As such it allows Hofmann’s self-absorbed lyric to maintain its balance, metaphorically-speaking, through the somewhat giddy extra-temporal parabasis by which the adult poet asserts the right of his young anti-authoritarian literary self to be taken into account. It can be argued that in the context of 1980s British poetry—or Anglophone literature more generally—such moments in Hofmann’s œuvre lend weight to a process of “Europeanization” which Delanty, writing idealistically in 2006, long before “Brexit,” calls “one of the most relevant examples of cosmopolitanism” (41).³ As Delanty explains, “Europeanization entails horizontal links exist between European societies, vertical between European societies and EU, and transversal between European societies and the global, as

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³ Two other British-based poets of recent times whose work extends British poetry by drawing on the resources of a continental European family background are the German-born Michael Hamburger, who died in 2007, and the Hungarian-born George Szirtes. But Hofmann’s poetry sharply distinguishes itself from theirs for the way it turns toward American poetry at least as much as it does toward British and Central European registers.
well as between the EU and the global” (41). The problem is that the transversal linkage to the rest of the world is conspicuous by its absence in “My Father’s House.” An exception is “Mexico ’66,” an account of a family holiday in Mexico to which Hofmann is apparently drawn back in memory on account of the country’s contingent qualities contrasting so greatly with his father’s stately ways: “The scene is so wrong I’ve lost you from it” (Acrimony 50). Hofmann’s sketching of that country amid its preparations for hosting the Olympics—“it was like America gone bad, America built on toxicity: / chilli dogs, alcohol, sugar and chocolate” (50)—announces an emergent globalist tendency in his work. But for the most part, when Hofmann gestures beyond the non-European world in Nights in the Iron Hotel and Acrimony—as he does with the subaltern identities of nomad and “street Arab”—this is as a way of representing his own highly European cosmopolitan displacement. The non-European experience of colonialism and migration is never really at issue.

Hofmann’s recent parenthetical statement in a review of the Canadian poet Karen Solie, “I’ve come to think you can’t actually have poetry without dandyism” (Where Have You Been? 185), is germane to a style in which a self-delighting, mildly transgressive kind of pleasure (as well as a pathos) is generated around the poet’s exotic appropriation of “street Arab” as a signifier of the presumably bearable state of exclusion that is an international airport! The dandy-collector’s pleasure in amassing objects that reflect his own worldly tastes—or anxieties—comes across very strongly in the reference to the airport sprinklers as “whirling dervishes” (Acrimony 61). It is one of the great virtues of “My Father’s House” to show us how ambivalently privileged and personal the experience of cosmopolitanism may sometimes be. Viewed from the perspective of cosmopolitan theorists determined to extend Western knowledge beyond Western cultural borders, Hofmann’s early dandy persona perhaps shows us this privileged experience a little too well. But with his next poetry volume he was to embark on a far more sustained “encounter of the local with the global.”

The Expanding Wound: Corona, Corona

The poet and translator (and friend of Hofmann’s) Jamie McKendrick writes of Corona, Corona (1993) that it “seems to have found the most satisfyingly complex way of exploring both identity and the world beyond the self—a world more inclusive than could easily be found in any other contemporary poet” (50). In what remains of this paper I want to explore the relative cosmopolitan inclusivity of the 1993 volume, while also attending to the way this book and Hofmann’s
subsequent poetry produce an awareness of the limits of its author’s and, by implication, the reader’s, ability to engage with the cosmopolitan Other.

Corona, Corona is divided into three sections. The first part is a chronologically-arranged, ostensibly biographical miscellany of transnational and transitional existence, departure, decline, and fall. We slide from Roman proto-capitalism out of Plutarch (“Crassus, the inventor of the demi-pension holiday, / holed up in a cave on the coast of Spain for a month . . . // whose head was severed a day later than his son’s” [Corona 3]; ellipsis in original) to the final years of the innovative African-American musician Marvin Gaye—his “eccentricity and withdrawal” “In Ostend [where] he felt the eyes of the Belgians on him” and his return “[a]t forty-four” to a family house in Los Angeles, scene of his killing by his minister father: “A dog collar shot a purple dressing-gown, twice” (15). As McKendrick points out, there is an element of “autobiography by other means” in this section, for Gaye is one of a number of dead men succinctly memorialized here who “seem to have had serious trouble with their father” (43). It would appear that Hofmann, at this point in the volume, is unable or at least reluctant to leave behind his “fugitive childhood” (Acrimony 77) and the introspective cosmopolitanism of the second half of Acrimony.

But it is via the denouement of another of these father-son entanglements—the suicide in the Gulf of Mexico of the poet Hart Crane who is pictured (without apologies to Stevie Smith) as “an arm waving in the Caribbean, drowning” and as taking “up the hem” of his enormously wealthy candy manufacturer father’s “tombstone with his landless name” (Corona 10)—that the volume begins its progress beyond a purely Western-centric and psychological cosmopolitanism. The poem has previously mused on the name, “Hart Crane,” as one that “hardly fit a natural human man, / more an amalgamation, the merger of parent companies: / one surname after another” (10). In this context, Crane’s name is to be thought “landless” not only in the sense that its owner had disinherited himself from his father’s values to become a voyaging modernist (and Queer) poet but also in the sense that his name conjures an ultimately transnational world of capitalist accumulation.

Both the language of “amalgamation” and the feverish production-consumption that makes the divided father and son “Shoulder to shoulder”—a form of “manic repetition” (10) in the son’s case that includes the smoking of Corona cigars, the typing of poems on Corona typewriters, sex with sailors, and alcoholism
(the Mexican beer Corona?)—connect us with the next-but-one poem, “’50s Cuba”: “It was the farcical fast fast slow world / of dancing, miscegenation and cigars, Africanized Neoclassical New Spain”; “The prostitutes walked out on Virtue Street. / The U.S. Ambassador was the man to know” (13). In a way that subtly enacts the incestuous networks of international trade, Hart Crane’s “sugar daddy” (10) seems to haunt the later poem’s tragic-comic closing valedictions to the pre-Castro era, but his suicidal son also reappears, superimposed upon the disappearing figure of the pleasure-loving revolutionary who might have contributed to a less oppressive Cuba:

The Orthodoxos dissolved, and jewelled ladies,
panicking for the exit, found only sugar-frosted mirrors
where they scratched their names.
Camilo Cienfuegos was lost at sea like Glenn Miller.
Asylants sifted round an archipelago of embassies. (13)

There is a reminder in all of this archly figurative history of the Lowell-influenced American poet Frederick Seidel, in whose proper-noun- and personality-studded work Hofmann has admiringly located “an element of excess, of taunt, of trash, of (Les Murray’s word) ‘flaunt,’ a sort of F. Scott Fitzgerald that is three parts Roy Lichtenstein” (Where 93) to threaten the equilibrium of “the blandly vegan compound of contemporary poetry” (88). No less relevant to “’50s Cuba” and what we will find in later parts of Corona, Corona is Hofmann’s regard for Seidel and V. S. Naipaul—whom the much wealthier Seidel resembles in his multi-continental traveling—as “students of the remorseless spread of global capital and culture” (Where 89). While keeping the anti-authoritarian psychodrama of “My Father’s House” at an almost subliminal level of reading consciousness, the more modestly privileged Hofmann is warming to his densely materialist and darkly hybridized global historical theme.

The second section of Corona, Corona is more straightforwardly personal in theme but also has a powerful documentary effect. It is made up of a number of first-person accounts of limbo-like spaces and non-places encountered in Europe

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4 McKendrick must get the credit for pointing out these three possible sources of Hofmann’s doubling volume title. There is surely also a (drunkenly?) botched echo here of the title of the country blues song “Corrina, Corrina,” the most famous version of which, “Corrina, Corrina,” is sung by Bob Dylan.
and America that are cumulatively expressive of a terminal afternoon or early-morning mood defined in the section’s first poem as “sorrow, lust and peristalsis at three” (*Corona* 19). Peristalsis, literally a “wrapping around place,” can refer to the forcing onward of contents by waves of contraction (for instance, in the alimentary canal) and is therefore an appropriate word to find at the border between the first section’s restless historical movement and the second section’s more intimately perceived experiences of stasis and the “inachevée” (21). The latter is Hofmann’s dandyish and sullen summation of the petering out of a copulating sorority girl’s “little screams” (21) overheard from a hotel room above his in a “blue by pink downtown development” (20) of the American South. Once again we feel the masculinist influence of Seidel the “épateur” (*Where* 88): “an insouciant erotomania” (89); “a strange distanciation—a coldness, a deliberateness, a caricatural warp and yawp, a cartoonishness” (93). In the context of *Corona, Corona* as a whole, Hofmann’s evocation, in “Freebird,” of the failure of sexual mutuality and of the parochial stasis of his setting—“an electric grille and a siege mentality” (*Corona* 20)—whet the appetite for the rampant unfamiliar vividness of what is about to follow, while also preparing us for the obstructions that we will find to a fully “open” sort of cosmopolitanism.

For it is in the third part of the volume, a diaristic record of Hofmann’s travel in Mexico, where Hofmann really breaks new ground as a poet of cosmopolitanism, even as he insists upon his identity as a tourist and a European. For reasons that are hard to understand, this section has so far been left mostly uncommented-upon by critics: Rosanna Warren, for instance, dismisses it from her analysis of *Corona, Corona*, calling it merely “an acidic travel diary from Mexico” (70). For the great wonder of this sequence is the way in which Hofmann exposes his considerable poetic art to the influence of an unfamiliar place with globally significant implications, while simultaneously situating his perspectives all the more revealingly in the Eurocentrism of his own psychological needs.

Hofmann’s essentially uncommitted, touristic perspective on Mexico in this sequence is announced in the title of the first poem, “Postcard from Cuernavaca for Ralph Manheim,” and continues in that poem’s first stanza, which gives any reader in the know a strong sense of the almost willfully mediated and idiosyncratic character of Hofmann’s engagement with the country:

Picture me
sitting between the buttresses of Cuernavaca Cathedral
reading Lawrence on the clitoral orgasm, and (more!)
his notion of replacing the Virgin Mary,  
the one enduringly popular foreigner,  
with Cortez’ translator, later mistress, la Malinche,  
the one enduringly unpopular—because xenophile—Mexican . . .  

(Corona 39; ellipsis in original)

Thus Hofmann begins his Mexico sequence by foregrounding first himself (shamelessly, proto-selfie-style, with that “Picture me”) and then his European cultural imaginary point of entry—on this occasion, the British modernist D. H. Lawrence’s partly poetic 1926 novel The Plumed Serpent. This tells the story of an Irishwoman’s psycho-erotic involvement with the attempts of two Mexican revolutionary leaders to reintroduce the worship of Aztec gods to their country. For Hofmann, seeing and making us see Mexico through Lawrence’s speculatively primitivist novel seems to be a source of relish not only for the profane and heathen disturbance it effects on the real-world religious scenery around him but also for Lawrence’s celebration of hybridity in a context of cultural misprision. The stated misprision is Lawrence’s misleading enshrining of a folk deity version of the historical Nahua woman la Malinche, whose act of miscenegenation with the Spanish conqueror of Aztec culture conferred upon her the mythic status of both national victim and traitor. We have been placed, via the expatriate modernist Lawrence, in what we already know from Acrimony as Hofmann’s preferred postmodern state of inauthenticity.

But the important point here is that the misprision and inauthenticity are apparently not only Lawrence’s; they may also be Mexico’s. Hovering behind this stanza is the contradictory situation of a colonially imposed Catholic saint being worshipped while the woman whose “xenophile” behavior was believed to help bring about this imposition is reviled. As the poem—and the sequence—goes on, we are made to contemplate the possibility that there is a certain rightness in seeing Mexico through a layer of misrepresentation, when a type of existential mistranslation is actually integral to the post-colonial predicament of living in what Hofmann later calls “this botched country” that “Brueghel might have invented” (Corona 51)—just as inauthenticity is integral to the belated consciousness of the late-twentieth-century European tourist-poet noting that country for us. Despite having some capricious perceptual habits, Hofmann’s poetic persona is a “rooted” cosmopolitan in the sense that the poetry he speaks is one that acknowledges his non-universalistic European/Western position and perspective. Crucially, for his cosmopolitan poetics, it is precisely from this specific—and necessarily
compromised—perspective that the travel sequence is able to open out to the extent it does toward its differently compromised Other.

The sense of inauthenticity grows in the second stanza of “Postcard from Cuernavaca,” which evokes Cortez’s “old palace” (39) as perfect ersatz. The stanza provides a representative account of Hofmann’s general treatment of Mexico. It is hardly flattering. We witness the world-weary dropping of articles in “offensively large statue of Cortez—/revisionist Rivera mural,” part of his act of turning away—and of encouraging his reader to turn away—from Mexican public art.5

Once again, however, it is necessary to see how the poet brings himself into a relationship with Mexico that is based on a shared yet different inauthenticity. By exposing this desire to remove oneself from an official Mexican attempt at reconciliation with the country’s violent history—through the paradoxical means of embalming it in parentheses—Hofmann’s distinctive parabasis indirectly points us back toward it and, more significantly, toward the less official history occluded by it. This last sort of history arrives in the next part of the poem where, spotted incongruously beside “forests of helium balloons glittering under the fresno trees” and less incongruously beside “sociable black grackles” (39), appear the following ambiguously human forms:

Hawkers trailing by in profile like matadors, trailing—in one case a
hawk.
A Mariachi trumpeter, wearing just his old pesos,
trilling drily into the gutter. Ostensible Aztecs
stitching their silver Roman-style tunics im Schneidersitz. (39)

We seem to catch here a synoptic glimpse of Hofmann’s troubled, exhilarating poetics as a whole. The German phrase translates as “cross-legged,” more literally as “sitting tailor-fashion,” and more problematically but revealingly as “Indian-style

5 The stanza discussed here contains a parenthetical gesture to “where the volcanoes used to be” (Corona 39). This puts us in mind of another Mexican-set British literary text, Under the Volcano (1947), by Malcom Lowry, a volume of whose writings Hofmann has since edited and from whose poetry he quotes later in the sequence (48). Hofmann has called Lowry’s novel an “absolute mass, agglomeration of consciousness and experience and terrific personal grace” (Behind 248). The hybridizing and materialist emphasis here, which recalls the use of the word “amalgamation” in “Hart Crane,” points to some of the less resolved, less Eurocentric effects of Hofmann’s exposure of his own (and his reader’s) desire to turn away from Mexico.
sitting,” though none of these options carries the sense of “cutting” (schneiden), which should alert us to the greater import of the passage. The Aztecs are ostensibly themselves partly in the negative sense that they have been cut out of history and reduced to a decorative, museumified condition by an official or imperial (“Roman-style”) cosmopolitanism. The cut is also what Hofmann, in an essay on his translation, suggests is the “open wound” (Where Have You Been? 199) of the German language in him, “which is soothed and brought to healing by the application of English” (198). At this middle point of Hofmann’s published poetic oeuvre, the cosmopolitan wound of lacking authentic—in the sense of undivided, uncompromised—being is opening out to encompass more of the world. It does this partly as a wound that makes someone “ostensible” in the other senses of being vulnerably exposed yet nonetheless powerfully inscrutable to the external gaze. These indigenous musicians with European instruments and Spanish matador-like hawkers are here to tell us how little we actually know of their country. And they are not merely exotic in their inscrutability, for, rather than being discarded in the sequence like the Arab or nomad of Hofmann’s earlier work, they will be gathered into an emerging dialogue between his and Mexico’s authentically inauthentic identities.

Before we can appreciate the extent to which Hofmann’s way of keeping Mexico at a distance is actually a way of engaging with it, we need to see just how far, at one level, he is from it. When we reach the poem’s penultimate stanza, the act of turning away initially seems to have become a turning back to a “pirated” version of the European past:

There’s a band
hidden in Eiffel’s unilluminated iron snowdrop bandstand—
bought by the Austrians to cheer them up
when Maximilian left the scene—giving it some humpity.
The rondeur and Prussian gleam of the horns—
I sit and listen in the Café Viena. (40)

In his review of Hofmann’s Selected Poems, the poet’s interviewer for The Independent, Stephen Knight, criticizes the poems of Corona, Corona for being “too sought-after; alienation on a bursary” (“Via Mexico” 25). And we might decide that Hofmann is making his Eurocentric readers a little too at-home in the exilic cosmopolitan sedimentation of the scene just quoted. Is it not even a little decadent—a little “50s-Cuba”—to appreciate the way in which the Frenchness of
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the Shakespearean word “rondure,” which means “globe” as well as roundness, summons some of Mexico’s imperial backstory? This is the story of the liberal Austrian Habsburg monarch Maximilian I’s being brought to Mexico by the invading French to rule there as Emperor from 1864 and being executed three years later at the orders of Mexican generals (as depicted in Édouard Manet’s 1867-69 series of paintings).

But if this is decadent dandyism, it is decadent dandyism with an expansively cosmopolitan purpose. The stanza’s closing line, “[a]nything north of here goes, and most things east,” keeps this imperial history—which of course includes nineteenth-century American colonialism and liberalism from the north—in our minds, while pointing straight back to the neo-imperial re-fabrications of identity in the 1990s present. This retrospectively undercuts the elegiac soundtrack of the stanza just quoted, forcing us to attend to a global market with an accumulative logic from which many of us reading the poem in Europe and North America continue to be the beneficiaries. This is cosmopolitan poetry that requires us to acknowledge the economically geographic as well as the historically imperial position from which we are looking at Mexico.

Some of the material specificity of the implied global market appears in the first and last lines of the final stanza of “Postcard from Cuernavaca,” where a reminder of Lord Byron’s extravagant expatriate life with a menagerie in Venice is made bathetic by the forces of mass production: “Outside there is a chained monkey who bites. / He lives, / as I do, on Coke and bananas” (40).

As the volume goes on, Hofmann sometimes plays his materialist and inauthentic cosmopolitan theme for slightly perverse or muted laughs, as in the two-line poem, “One Man’s Mexico”: “The forty-first country to introduce / hair-extension treatment” (46), which quietly provincializes the unnamed forty countries ahead of Mexico in the queue almost as much as it does Mexico; or in his inventory of a “Gold Rush town,” “Las Casas,” which is described as a town in which “Everyone seemed to have come from somewhere else” and “Everyone was a source of money to everyone else. / Who had it” (41). But this last poem extends beyond mere mordancy to create a memorable, if also slightly terrifying, vision of production without gratification:

It was a raw town. The shoe shops sold mincing machines, hats and aluminium buckets shared a shelf, paper and iron went together—for the staking of claims, perhaps? A town of radio shops and funeral parlours—
the dead travelled to the aquamarine graveyard
in station wagons, horizontal, to music;
the living, upright, on pickups, also to music.
Of well-lit drink shops. Of illustrated marriage magazines
And spot-the-beachball shots in Kodak shops.

Of the all-day screech of tortilla machines
and the scrape of rockets up the sky, a flash in the pan,
a percussive crash, a surprisingly durable cloud.
Jubilation, and no eyes raised. (41)

The appearance in this passage of the familiar brand-name “Kodak” heightens the strangely double sense of familiarity and unfamiliarity in this zombie-like street scene. The overall effect of the passage can perhaps be explained partly in terms of what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls “the condition of possibility for the globalization of capital across diverse, porous, and conflicting histories of human belonging”—a condition he suggests is made possible by a theoretical and practical “translation” that also “ensures that this process of globalization of capital is not the same as the universal realization of what Marx regarded as its logic” (106). To put the matter undoubtedly much more simply than Chakrabarty would wish, cosmopolitan capitalism is always the same and always different. Perhaps this is one of the things the title Corona, Corona is trying to say with its difference-in-duplication, its homophonic translation of the imperial crown into capitalist mass production-consumption (of cigars, typewriters, words, beers). Later in the Mexico sequence we come across these lines, in which we seem to see the expansive tread of production alternately localizing and un-localizing to infinity: “Cities sprawl for ever on the seismic flats: / food, shanties, transport, Hispanoquímica . . .” (51; ellipsis in original).6

6 I am grateful to Ariel Pintor for explaining to me that the non-standard compound Hispanoquímica could refer to a particular blend of personality traits denoting (Spanish-speaking) Hispanics in a way that might include—or pointedly exclude—Spaniards.
Into Silence?

In his article “The Cosmopolitan Imagination: Critical Cosmopolitanism and Social Theory,” Gerard Delanty makes the possibly unpopular point that “the notion of hybridity does not fully account for cosmopolitanism,” citing the fact that “many hybrid phenomena—for example national socialism—are not in any coherent sense of the term cosmopolitan” (33). In the view of this sociologist, cosmopolitanism will have a “limited normative application” unless it contains “some notion of an alternative society” (33), and that therefore the “central animus of modernity”—namely, “the self-transformative drive to re-make the world in the image of the self in the absence of absolute certainty” (41) should provide the fundamental movement of cosmopolitanism.

In our reading of Hofmann’s poetry we have seen how his early work produced a somewhat perilous yet defiant new European cosmopolitan version of selfhood as a response to his experience of displacement and absence in childhood. After that, we observed how a developing attentiveness to materialist realities contributed to Hofmann’s increasingly ventured and internationalist exploration of cosmopolitanism in Cuba and above all Mexico. We have seen how by asserting a shared sense of historical “inauthenticity” his poetry has attempted to be faithful to the converging and individualized histories of imperialism and capitalism while emphasizing the extent to which his and his reader’s cosmopolitan knowledge will be limited by their cultural position.

At the very end of his Mexico travel sequence, Hofmann powerfully yet negatively affirms his commitment to Delanty’s cosmopolitan idealism, which the sociologist also defines by the phrase, “world openness” (27) or “situations, which we may term the cosmopolitan imagination” in which “codifications of both Self and Other”—and therefore societies as such—“undergo transformation” (37). Hofmann’s closing poem has the notably translationese title “Guanajuato Two Times” and is dedicated, like the first poem of the sequence, to Karl Miller:

I could keep returning to the same few places
till I turned blue; till I turned into
José José
on the sleeve of his new record album,
“What is Love?”;
wearing a pleasant frown and predistressed denims;
reading the double-page spread (“The Trouble with José José”)
on his drink problem,  
comparing his picture “Before” and “After” . . . (54; ellipsis in 
original)

So begins Hofmann’s farewell to Mexico in a conditional voice (“I could . . .”) that 
sounds absurdly counter-factual as soon as the idea of becoming better acquainted 
with the country—of turning “blue in the face” with the effort doing so—is 
associated with the blues of a very local-sounding Mexican pop star. His “Before” 
and “After” pictures provide a tabloid-predigested and therefore parodic template of 
the dialectic of Self and Other that is at stake here. The poem continues in the voice 
of unlikely avowal. Taken singly, the poem’s many conditionals sound 
disingenuous and even dismissive of Mexico, and yet in their accumulated form 
they somehow make a moving psalm to the ideal of a fully global and local 
cosmopolitanism in the elegiac key of the “inachevée” (to refer again to the second 
section of Corona, Corona):

I could slowly become a ghost, slowly familiar,
.................................................................
Sit on both sides of the municipal kissing seats, 
shaking my head at the blanket men
and the hammock men, in their humorous desperation
offering me hammocks for four, for five, for six . . . (ellipsis in 
original)
And get the hang of the double handshake, 
First the palms, then the locked thumbs.
.................................................................
............. I could stand and sway like a palm, 
or rooted like a campanile, crumbling slightly
each time the bells tolled, not real bells 
but recordings of former bells,
And never for me. (Corona 55; ellipsis added)

As so often in Hofmann’s poetry, we are left with a bittersweet posture of 
inauthenticity and mediatedness: the recorded bells in the Mexican civic bell tower 
have tolled for John Donne and Ernest Hemingway before not tolling for him. More 
expansively, the allusion to Donne’s famous ethical and religious meditation (“any 
man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never
send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee” [Donne 344]) makes it possible to read this moment in Hofmann’s poetics in relation to a celebrated enquiry into cosmopolitanism. Appiah, who shares Hofmann’s broadly affirmative view of cultural inauthenticity—or “contamination” (112)—argues for a cosmopolitan ethics of care for strangers, where “cosmopolitanism” stands for “intelligence and curiosity as well as engagement” (168). Intelligence in this context turns out to have a lot to do with understanding long-term global economic processes in such a way that continuing to lead an affluent Western lifestyle can be seen as compatible with helping the lives of poorer people elsewhere. Underpinning Appiah’s optimistic materialist position is his almost naïve-sounding but certainly compelling suggestion that, if “[t]he problem of cross-cultural communication can seem immensely difficult in theory, when we are trying to imagine making sense of a stranger in the abstract” (99), the practical reality can be much simpler:

[T]he points of entry to cross-cultural conversations are things that are shared by those who are in the conversation. They do not need to be universal; all they need to be is what these particular people have in common. Once we have found enough we share, there is the further possibility that we will be able to enjoy discovering things we do not share. That is one of the payoffs of cosmopolitan curiosity. We can learn from one another; or we can simply be intrigued by alternative ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. (97)

“Guanajuato Two Times” is written out of an awareness that its author has to some degree failed to sustain this “conversation” (or “double handshake”) with Mexico, despite their approximately common currency in inauthenticity. This poem tells us we will not experience the moment in cultural or individual consciousness when “the stranger is no longer imaginary, but real and present, sharing a social life” (Appiah 99); “the blanket men / and the hammock men” remain just that. And yet if Corona, Corona announces the limits of its transnational empathy, ending as it does with a pointed “me,” it may also be thought to recuperate at least some of its commitment to receiving the stranger/Other in the way it gestures tragically—that is, not merely parodically—to an abandoned particularity of human exchange. In the rapidly fading image of the street traders’ “humorous desperation / offering me hammocks for four, for five, for six . . .” (Corona 54; ellipsis in original) we have a dissolve shot of just a little of the unfashionable material dailiness this “me” would have to know for a fully other-oriented cosmopolitan consciousness to come into
being. To put it another way, the practical, psychological possibility and difficulty of a truly global poetic cosmopolitanism resonate in the silent laughter of those ellipses, in that unheard bell.

By the time of Hofmann’s next poetry volume, Approximately Nowhere (1999), circumstances had determined that the sense of a retreat from a fully global cosmopolitan Otherness (in Appiah’s terms) would generally appear more entrenched. His father was dead; the first section of the volume commemorates this fact by revisiting, in memory and ambivalent mourning, some of Gert Hofmann’s places and, unavoidably, some of the psychological terrain of Acrimony—even if the “dicke Luft” (Approximately 12) of that earlier volume has dissipated somewhat with the father’s declining power to harm. The novelist is pictured in his final manifestation: “never now wifeless” (9); “arm in arm, old, stable (your new trick, // except at your age you don’t learn new tricks)” (8). Hofmann invites us to see the inauthentic contingency of the novelist’s late marital fidelity reflected in the tranquillized blandness of the Erding district of Bavaria, where Gert spent most of his final months, while also pointing to the expansionist motivations that remain: “the gigantic activity of the new airport // racing day and night to completion like a new book” (8).

The mantle of ostensible infidelity, meanwhile, has passed to Hofmann fils: the third part of Approximately Nowhere records an affair that brought an end to his first marriage. Absorbed in an oceanic bodily instant of self and lover, the protagonist of this section appears to have little time for the effort of encountering additionally unfamiliar human particularity. Besides some willfully English-dialect notations of Gainesville, Florida, where “little old ladies // squinny over their dashboards / and bimble into the millennium” (30) and some long-distance (auto-) erotica—“five or six time zones adrift of you / and in temperatures close to blood heat, I keep my balls / coddled in your second-best lace panties” (73)—we are not made aware of Hofmann’s part-time relocation to that American state in 1993. What we get instead is a portrait of a poet in permanent flight, though one able to offer some cumulatively powerful backward glances at the country (and the broken marriage) he was fleeing. “Malvern Road,” which catalogs memories of “the street where we first set up house” (60), could hardly count as a cosmopolitan poem in most British-published poetry books, but it does here, since its almost perversely specific period details (“the grim Tuesday Guardian Society-section aspect of it” [60]; “the health centre padlocked and grilled like an offie” [61]) so clearly emanate from some geographical elsewhere—perhaps barely-described Florida, or perhaps one of the train stations or train journeys he documents in other poems of the
collection, which is to say: from approximately nowhere. But Corona, Corona’s expanding vision of “the remorseless spread of global capital and culture” (Where 89) has a discontinued look about it from this point on.

Nine years passed before the next Hofmann poetry volume, the 2008 Selected Poems, which appeared with a sprinkling of new poems at the end. This final section is most notable for its discovery of a new cosmopolitan breed—the poem written in the wake of a child’s stay with a parent who lives in a different country from their ex-partner. “Motet” expresses a volatile sense of deracinated love, actually risking sentimentality in its closing lines, where the intimately felt distance between Jakob Hofmann and his second-generation-itinerant father is summoned by the latter’s US English usage. Amongst the tenderly enumerated items of “squalor” his younger son has left behind, the father registers “a wilted squadron of paper airplanes / ready to take me after you” (Selected 137).

But despite the injection of “New York School” discourse elsewhere in “New Poems,” the overriding impression is one of imaginative exhaustion. Openings seem to rehearse their author’s own petering out: “When all’s said and done, there’s still . . .” (142; ellipsis added); “It was—what?—” (143). The volume ends with the quietly dismayed cosmopolitan words in parentheses, “leaving Bonn,” after an elision of the images of scavenging crows and the caffeinated poet-traveler: “milling / early birds, Styrofoam beaker of coffee, / refill, refill, and a spot of red-eye gravy” (146). This machine-like repetition is above all the sound of a poet hastily exiting his own unwanted stage.

The rest has almost but not quite been silence: since 2009, stray brilliant poems by Hofmann have been appearing in journals without yet giving birth to a new full collection. One of the most recent journal poems, “Derrick,” published in London Review of Books in 2015, suggests new possibilities for his cosmopolitan poetics. This poem slyly and winningly memorializes a deceased Welsh neighbor from an unspecified period of Hofmann’s life through a web of imperfect reminiscence and the poet’s own adjunctive status. And yet the rhetorical force of Hofmann’s recent poetic silences remains. The poet’s own reason for his muteness—that he needed the conflict with his father to write poems—is only properly convincing if we ignore the bulk of Corona, Corona, where the Eurocentric agon with Gert has already been overtaken by an expansive encounter with larger cultural Otherness, albeit an encounter shown to be fragile and even partly disavowed. On the other hand, it may be that the dialectical trick of engaging with the stranger/Other through disengagement—by, for instance, indicating but not sententiously apologizing for one’s privileged and compromised Eurocentric
perspective—is simply not one that can be repeated ad infinitum. Not everyone can keep writing like late-period Seidel.

But larger cultural forces may also be in play. Hofmann’s silences seem to speak of a wider crisis of confidence in politically-informed Anglophone writing about how to reach out to non-Western areas of experience without exposing oneself to negative criticism. As Western-based writers become more acquainted with the cultural situations of a greater number of places in the world, they are inevitably made more conscious of their limited knowledge of facts on the ground. This is one of the paradoxes of cosmopolitanism. It is perhaps no mere coincidence that the period of Hofmann’s lengthening silences overlaps with a new era of migration, statelessness, terror, and international relations arising out of the continuing carnage of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq—phenomena that certainly concern (if not accuse) much of the West but are not any the less disorientating for doing so.

Far better, we might decide, to busy oneself with the job of translating twentieth-century and later German literature into English, as Hofmann has been doing at a quite astonishing rate. This would certainly seem a guaranteed method of modestly increasing the sum of cosmopolitan empathy of the cultured European variety at least—and at a time when, in Britain, the incidence of violent attacks on non-British EU nationals has risen with terrifying alacrity in the wake of the EU referendum vote. But then there are those few poems that have managed to get through the self-censor. “Derrick” seems to tell us that poetry will continue to be a medium through which Hofmann chooses to express his relationship with the multiple localities that make up his cosmopolitan world. Like Approximately Nowhere and the new poems of Selected Poems, it also suggests this poet won’t be prioritizing any internationalist political program ahead of his immediate personal need to gather the threads of what he has been missing. Partly because of that long-standing personal emphasis—and partly because he has already very memorably shown how all manner of unpredictably (in)authentic connections can and must be made across cultures—Hofmann’s elliptical silences become rich invitations to everyone to consider the poetic cosmopolitanism to come.

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### About the Author

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