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“We are magicians! We have the sixth sense! Victory will still be ours!”

Gertrud Pfander never gained international renown, but the Basel-born poet who died in 1898 at the age of 24 left behind a heartbreakingly moving testimony to the many victims of tuberculosis.

CHARLES LINSMAYER

«Ich wollte weisse Adler senden
Und liess ein Schwalbenpärchen raus.
Ich wollte mächtige Worte wenden,
Ich wollte weisse Lilien spenden
Und nun ist's nur ein Heidestrauß.»

[I wanted to send white eagles on their way / And a pair of swallows flew away. / I wanted to use powerful words, / I wanted to dole out white lilies, / But all I have left now is a bouquet of heather.] This verse, which Gertrud Pfander used to preface her last poems in 1898, tells of her resistance finally withering away in the face of illness. According to a résumé of her brief life, written in 1896, she was still waiting for “that ray of sunshine” because her “flame [had] not yet been extinguished”. Pfander, who was born out of wedlock on 1 May 1874 in Basel, had grown up feeling almost intolerably neglected and lost. Short stays abroad had helped her overcome her most wretched feelings. She had just begun to find her inner peace working as a switchboard operator when she contracted tuberculosis and her world came crashing down. Pfander, who had inherited a small fortune, was now 20. But life was about to end before it had even started. She would move from sanatorium to sanatorium like an outcast, suffering more from an insatiable, acute yearning for love and security than from her illness.

An existential need to write

It was certainly no surprise when she picked up a pen and paper, as she had previously done as a child. Yet it seems a wonderful act of providence that Pfander was so remarkably adept at channelling the sense of im-

pending doom or any scintilla of joy that remained in her life, relying on a conventional, almost naive rhyming poetry style reminiscent of a Heinrich Heine or an Annette von Droste-Hülshoff. But it was not the style itself that mattered; rather, the radicalism with which Pfander recounted only her own intimate experiences, the openness with which she

expressed her feelings, and the way in which she placed a woman’s perspective of love front and centre as the subject and the man as the object of her narrative, as if this were the most natural thing in the world, which it certainly was not at the time.

Poems fuelled by love

Although her muse wore a “black dress with a train”, it was also love that fuelled Pfander’s poetry to the end: undeclared love for the first violinist of the Montreux Casino Orchestra, (music was a core theme of her poetry in 1894); or love for a young man from Thuringia, who left Lake Geneva and moved to Cairo in 1896, fuelling in her a fascination for exotic lands (which was also reflected in the poems). But Pfander’s most poignant relationship was with 19-year-old sculptor Abraham Graf, who also had lung disease and died one month before her. She dedicated four heart-rending poems to Graf in 1897. Pfander died on 9 November 1898 in Davos at the age of 24, leaving behind a total of 80 poems. These works, some of which had already seen the light of day in 1896 (“Passifloren”), were published in full by Karl Henckell in 1908 (“Helldunkel”). Even well over a century later, it is hard to tell how many of Pfander’s beautiful poems were meant to endure. For the author herself, they were at any rate a wonderful source of comfort and fulfilment. “We are a people of poets!” she proclaimed in a letter written in the same year she died. “We are magicians! We have the sixth sense! Victory will still be ours! Te Deum laudamus!”

“I was always left alone but always managed to find myself in new places when no one was looking. So I became all the more familiar with big mountains and big clouds. But I am still waiting for that ray of sunshine. Because my flame has not yet been extinguished. And because I have recounted this to my dear friends in verse, I have become a poet. My teacher is life, most of this an unhappy life. It is impossible to explain through cogent reasoning or philosophy. I would like to ask my readers to believe that my poems owe less to ingenuity and more to the absolute need to be truthful.”

(Gertrud Pfander, preface to the “Passifloren” anthology of poems, Zurich 1896; out of print)



Gertrud Pfander
(1874–1898)

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