

SECOND THROUGH BRAIN

A FREAKILY HIGH-TORQUED NOVEL

MELCHIOR VISCHER

Translated by
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&
TIM KÖNIG



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Melchior Vischer, **Sekunde durch Hirn**
(Hannover: Paul Steegemann, 1920)

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Kart. M. 2.—, geb. M. 3.—

Schwitters: Die Kathedrale
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INTRODUCTION

“RADIANTLY SPLATTERED”:

MELCHIOR VISCHER'S *SECOND THROUGH BRAIN*

Only randomly does one peek into life. Perhaps my life was just a life lived in-between experiencing. Perhaps I haven't lived a life at all, perhaps it was a life of another, or that which no-one's ever lived.¹

He was only twenty-seven when he wrote this postscript to his third and most autobiographical novel, *Der Hase*—a strangely prophetic/proleptic formula that the eighty-odd years his own life eventually amounted to were supposed to exemplify. Not that he could've had any reason to suspect at this stage the future downward spiral into anonymity and non-existence those years would indeed become. For in 1922, Melchior Vischer was gaining acclaim as the pioneering representative of the dada movement in Prague, which was to materialise a year later in the honourable mention from the committee of the highly prestigious Kleist Prize. His early publications had received excellent reviews, and his fame as a writer was further enhanced by his reputation as a newspaperman and

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¹ “Zufällig schaut man ins Leben. Vielleicht war mein Leben nur ein Leben, das man zwischen dem Erleben lebt. Vielleicht habe ich auch gar kein Leben gelebt, vielleicht war es das Leben eines anderen, oder auch das, was niemand erlebt hat.“ Melchior Vischer, *Der Hase: Eine Erzählung* (Melchior Vischer, *Sekunde durch Hirn, Der Teemeister, Der Hase und andere Prosa* [München: Hartmut Geerken, 1976] 164, my translation).

essayist, being an early champion of Franz Kafka, Franz Werfel, and Robert Musil, with each of whom he maintained contact. Although only slightly younger than these more famous Prague-German authors, Vischer was to outlive them all by more than three decades, the only one to survive the Second World War. But longevity came at a price: his death in Berlin, in 1975, concluded decades of obscurity; an obscurity as complete as it was mysterious—the product, variously, of a failed artistic vision and what in the end was his highly elusive, taciturn personality. Vischer’s obscurity became so complete, in fact, that when a year after his death his juvenilia of the early 1920s was being reprinted for the very first time, the publisher was unable to trace the copyright holders.²

“A LIFE OF ANOTHER”:

EMIL FISCHER & MELCHIOR VISCHER

6 Born Emil Walter Kurt Fischer, Melchior Vischer (1895–1975)³—as he came to be known—was the son of an apothecary in Teplice, a spa town in the Sudeten region of North-West Bohemia; the venue, in 1812, of the only recorded meeting between Goethe and Beethoven. He was just old enough to complete his secondary education at a Prague grammar school before the outbreak of World War I—into which he was promptly enrolled, serving as a lieutenant in a Hungarian infan-

² As related in Georg Jappe, “Wie ein starker Traum: Melchior Vischers Wiederentdeckung” (*Die Zeit* 16, 15 Apr 1977). Online: <http://www.zeit.de/1977/16/wie-ein-starker-traum>.

³ The following account is loosely based on Peter Engel’s entry on Vischer in *Prager Profile: Vergessene Autoren im Schatten Kafkas*, ed. Hartmut Binder (Berlin: Binder, 1991), on Hartmut Geerken’s “Afterword” to Melchior Vischer, *Sekunde durch Hirn, Der Teemeister, Der Hase und andere Prosa* (München: Hartmut Geerken, 1976), on Jürgen Serke’s *Böhmische Dörfer—Wanderungen durch eine verlassen literarische Landschaft* (Wien, Hamburg: Paul Zsolnay Verlag, 1987), and on Christian Jäger’s *Minoritäre Literatur. Das Konzept der kleinen Literatur am Beispiel prager- und sudeutsche Werke* (Wiesbaden: Deutscher Universitäts-Verlag, 2005).

try regiment stationed in Galicia. His wartime experiences would later be worked into his novel *Der Hase*.

The end of the First World War found Vischer in Prague, recovering from a neck-injury received on the front. After recuperating he enrolled in courses in German literature, art history, philosophy and mathematics at Charles University and took a position at the newly formed *Prager Presse* as a theatre-critic. It was in this post that he met the actress Eva Segaljewitsch,



Emil Fischer, c1915

of a Jewish origin, whom he soon married. And it was also during this period that Vischer made his notable debut on the international literary scene, with the publication, in 1920, of *Sekunde durch Hirn* (*Second through Brain*), promoted as the first “dada novel” (“insofar,” as Vischer himself wrote in a letter from January of that year, “as one can still use the silly word ‘novel’ at all”⁴).

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From his mid- to late-twenties, Vischer’s star continued to rise, publishing a further three novels and a variety of novellas and short stories,⁵ all of which garnered high praise within Prague German literary circles. The critics Johannes Urzidil and

⁴ “Ich glaube damit den ersten deutschen dadaistischen Roman (wenn man überhaupt noch von dem blöden Wort ‘Roman’ sprechen kann) geschaffen zu haben” (Melchior Vischer, *Unveröffentlichte Briefe und Gedichte*, ed. Raoul Schrott [Siegen, 1988] 6).

⁵ In addition to *Sekunde durch Hirn* (*Second through Brain*, 1920), the most prominent being *Strolch und Kaiserin* (*Tramp and Empress*, 1921), *Der Tee-meister* (*The Teamaster*, 1921) and *Der Hase* (*The Hare*, 1922).



Melchior Vischer, c1922; Eva Segaljewitsch ("Eva German")

Ernst Weiß described Vischer's *Second through Brain* as the literary equivalent of a Cézanne's canvass—an exploration of spatial form by the temporal means of narrative.⁶ Here is the Brno-born Ernst Weiß, reviewing *Second* for *Das Tage-Buch*:

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In every line of this extraordinary work there's the effortless gift of grace: poetry [...]. A second through brain, a dream-second through the brain of a man deliriously falling, the metamorphoses of Venus, the thousand faces of the earth spirit, heads and their contraries experienced at a thousand-mile tempo, sucked away by an overpowering drive for being [...]. Dada is a form, Dada itself is a form for a poet.⁷

⁶ Qtd in Jäger, *Minoritäre Literatur*, 465.

⁷ "In jeder Zeile dieser außerordentlichen Arbeit ist das mühelose Gnadengeschenk: Dichtung... Eine Sekunde durch Hirn, eine Traumsekunde durch das Hirn eines resend abstürzenden Menschen, die Verwandlungen der Venus, die tausend Gesichte des Erdgeistes, Köpfe und ihr Gegenteil im Tausendkilometertempo erlebt, ausgesaugt von einem übermächtigen Drang nach Dasein [...]. Dada ist eine Form, selbst Dada ist eine Form für einen Dichter" (qtd. in Serker, *Böhmische Dörfer*, 165).

Reviews such as this one made it seem Melchior Vischer had well and truly arrived.

UNTERGANG DES ABENDLANDES

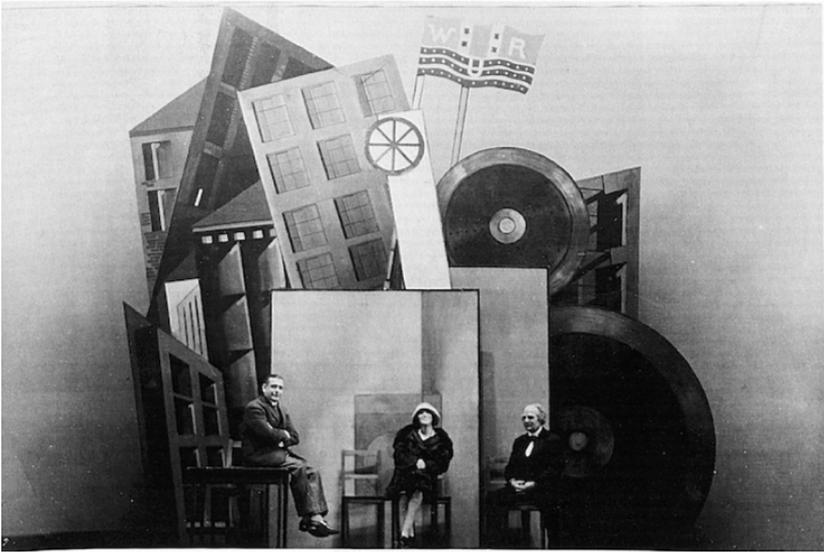
In 1923, at the apogee of his literary career, Vischer abandoned his post at the *Prager Presse* and departed from the city to spend four years fruitlessly wandering through Germany in pursuit of a career in the theatre. From August 1925 to July 1927, Vischer was theatre director in Baden-Baden, also taking over the theatre's bulletin. But his attempts at reforming the theatre⁸ weren't embraced with quite as much enthusiasm as his application for a secondment to a more progressive Frankfurt theatre house. That appointment turned out even shorter, and still in 1927, Vischer finally settled in Berlin, seeking to establish himself in the German capital as a playwright—a decision he came to regret more than once. As he states in a 1929 letter to Munich-based art patron Frigga von Brockdorf Noda,

I used to be one of the first and highest-rated directors in South Germany (my last appointment being the "Schauspielhaus" in Frankfurt am Main), but two years ago I dumbly let myself be lured to Bln. [Berlin] and have been unable to gain a foothold anywhere since I stand apart from the local clique. And once you find yourself outside of the province, it's exceedingly hard to go back ever again. [...] But maybe I'll get a lucky break soon. Indeed, these past two years I've been a losing streak.⁹

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⁸ Vischer's efforts chiefly focused on staging his own works and adaptations of novelties by his former Prague colleagues (Musil's *The Enthusiasts*) and traditional pieces (Büchner's *Danton's Death*), starring his wife under the artistic pseudonym "Eva German."

⁹ "Ich weiß nicht, ob es Ihnen bekannt ist, ich war nämlich einer der ersten und höchstbezahltesten Regisseure Süddeutschlands (zuletzt in Frankfurt am Main am Schauspielhaus), ließ mich aber vor zwei Jahren dummerweise nach Bln. locken, kann hier aber nirgends festen Fuß fassen, weil ich abseits von der Clique stehe. Und wenn man mal draußen ist, kommt man



Melchior Vischer (left) with Eva German staging Čapek's *RUR* in Baden-Baden during the late '20s

Did Vischer refer to Prague by “the province” and was he by this stage becoming resentful of his “provincial,” Czech/Sudeten-German origins? Jürgen Serke seems to think so, casting the Vischer of the 1920s already as “a case in point of a writer plucked out of the Czech context so as to fit the frame of the German culture.”¹⁰ Possibly, but in Vischer’s case, the “plucking-out” seems to have been largely self-determined.

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In any case, the future seems to have held few more lucky breaks for Vischer. By the early 1930s, unable to make ends meet penning theatre reviews on the side, Vischer turned his hand to writing popular sensational novels, which he penned in tandem with his wife Eva. For some, this is where the story of

auch schwer in die Provinz wieder hinein. [...] Aber vielleicht glückt es mir doch einmal. Seit zwei Jahren ziehe ich allerdings an einer Pechsträhne” (Vischer, *Unveröffentlichte Briefe*, 12), my parentheses.

¹⁰ “[...] das Paradebeispiel für ein Dichtershicksal zu werden, das aus seinem böhmischen Zusammenhang genommen wird, damit es in den deutschen Kulturrahmen paßt” (Serke, *Böhmische Dörfer*, 165).