

Classic Poetry Series

Franz Werfel

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Franz Werfel (10 September 1890 – 26 August 1945)

Franz Viktor Werfel was an Austrian-Bohemian novelist, playwright, and poet whose career spanned World War I, the Interwar period, and World War II. He is primarily known as the author of *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* (1933, English tr. 1934, 2012), a novel based on events that took place during the Armenian Genocide of 1915, and *The Song of Bernadette* (1941), a novel about the life and visions of the French Catholic saint Bernadette Soubirous, which was made into a Hollywood film of the same name.

Biography

Born in Prague (then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire), Werfel was the first of three children of a wealthy Jewish manufacturer of gloves and leather goods, Rudolf Werfel. His mother, Albine Kussi, was the daughter of a mill owner. His two sisters were Hanna (born 1896) and Marianne Amalie (born 1899). As a child, Werfel was raised by his Czech Catholic governess, Barbara Šimunková, who often took him to mass in Prague's main cathedral. Like the children of other progressive German-speaking Jews in Prague, Werfel was educated at a Catholic school run by the Piarists, a teaching order that allowed for a rabbi to instruct Jewish students for their Bar Mitzvahs. This, along with his governess's influence, gave Werfel an early interest (and expertise) in Catholicism, which soon branched out to other faiths, including Theosophy and Islam, such that reading his fiction, as well as his nonfiction, can be an exercise in comparative religion.

Werfel began writing at an early age and, by 1911, had published his first book of poems, *Der Weltfreund*, which can be translated as "the friend to the world" as well as philanthropist, humanitarian, and the like. By this time, Werfel had befriended other German Jewish writers who frequented Prague's Café Arco, chief among them Max Brod and [Franz Kafka](http://www.poemhunter.com/franz-kafka/) and his poetry was praised by such critics as [Karl Kraus](http://www.poemhunter.com/karl-kraus/), who published Werfel's early poems in Kraus's journal, *Die Fackel* (The Spark). In 1912, Werfel moved to Leipzig, where he became an editor for Kurt Wolff's new publishing firm, where Werfel championed and edited Georg Trakl's first book of poetry. While living in Germany, Werfel's milieu grew to include Else Lasker-Schüler, [Martin Buber](http://www.poemhunter.com/martin-buber/), [Rainer Maria Rilke](http://www.poemhunter.com/rainer-maria-rilke/) among other German-language writers, poets, and intellectuals in the first decades of the twentieth century.

With the outbreak of World War I, Werfel served in the Austro-Hungarian

Army on the Russian front as a telephone operator. His duties both exposed him to the vicissitudes of total war as well as provided him with enough of a haven to continue writing Expressionist poems, ambitious plays, and letters voluminously. His strange mix of humanism, confessionalism, autobiography, as well as mythology and religiosity developed further during this time.

His poems and plays ranged from scenes of ancient Egypt (notably the monotheism of Akhenaton) to occult allusions (Werfel had participated in séances with his friends Brod and Kafka) and incorporate a parable from the Bahá'í Faith in the poem "Jesus and the Carrion Path." His bias for Christian subjects, as well as his antipathy for Zionism, eventually alienated many of his Jewish friends and readers, including early champions such as Karl Kraus. Others, however, stood by him, including, Martin Buber, who published a sequence of poems from Werfel's wartime manuscript, *Der Gerichtstag* (Judgment Day, published in 1919) in his monthly journal, *Der Jude* (The Jew). and wrote of Werfel in his prefatory remark:

Since I was first moved by his poems, I have opened (knowing well, I should say, it's a problem) the gates of my invisible garden [i.e., an imaginarium] to him, and now he can do nothing for all eternity that would bring me to banish him from it. Compare, if you will, a real person to an anecdotal one, a late book to an earlier, the one you see to you yourself; but I am not putting a value on a poet, only recognizing that he is one—and the way he is one.

In the summer of 1917, Werfel left the frontline for the Military Press Bureau in Vienna, where he joined other notable Austrian writers serving as propagandists, among them [Robert Musil](http://www.poemhunter.com/robert-musil/), Rilke, [Hugo von Hofmannsthal](http://www.poemhunter.com/hugo-von-hofmannsthal/), [Stefan Zweig](http://www.poemhunter.com/stefan-zweig/), and Franz Blei. Through the latter, Werfel met and fell in love with Alma Mahler, widow of Gustav Mahler, the former lover of the painter Oskar Kokoschka, and the wife of the architect Walter Gropius, then serving in the Imperial German Army on the Western Front. Alma, who was also a composer, had already set one of Werfel's poems to music, reciprocated despite Werfel being much younger, shorter, and having Jewish features that she, being both anti-Semitic and attracted to Jewish men, found initially distasteful. Their love affair culminated in the premature birth of a son, Martin, in August 1918. Martin, who was given the surname of Gropius, died in May of the following year. Despite attempts to save his marriage to Alma, with whom he had a young daughter, Manon, Gropius reluctantly agreed to a divorce in 1920. Ironically, Alma refused to marry Werfel for the next nine years. However, Alma, more so than with her first two husbands and lovers, lent herself to the development of Werfel's career and influenced it in such a way that he became an accomplished playwright and novelist as well as poet. By the end of the decade, Werfel had become one of the most important and established writers in German and Austrian literature and had already merited one full-length critical biography.

A journey in 1930 to the Middle East and encountering starving refugees inspired his novel *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* which drew world attention to the Armenian Genocide at the hands of the Turks. Werfel lectured on this subject across Germany. The Nazi newspaper *Das Schwarze Corps* denounced him as a propagandist of "alleged Turkish horrors perpetrated against the Armenians." The same newspaper, suggesting a link between the Armenian and the later Jewish genocide, condemned "America's Armenian Jews for promoting in the U.S.A. the sale of Werfel's book."

Werfel left Austria after the Anschluss in 1938 and went to France. After the German invasion and occupation of France during World War II, and the deportation of French Jews to the Nazi concentration camps, Werfel had to flee again. With the assistance of Varian Fry and the Emergency Rescue Committee in Marseille, he and his wife narrowly escaped the Nazi regime and traveled to the United States.

While in France, Werfel made a visit to the shrine of the Our Lady of Lourdes

at Lourdes, where he found spiritual solace. He also received much help and kindness from the Catholic orders that staffed the shrine. He vowed to write about the experience and, safe in America, he published *The Song of Bernadette* in 1941.

In southern California, Werfel wrote his final play, *Jacobowsky and the Colonel* (*Jacobowsky und der Oberst*) which was made into the 1958 film *Me and the Colonel* starring Danny Kaye; Giselher Klebe's opera *Jacobowsky und der Oberst* (1965) is also based on this play. Before his death, he completed the first draft of his last novel *Star of the Unborn* (*Stern der Ungeborenen*), which was published posthumously in 1946.

Franz Werfel died in Los Angeles in 1945 and was interred there in the Rosedale Cemetery. However, his body was returned in 1975 to Vienna for reburial in the Zentralfriedhof.

Works:

Verdi. Novel of the Opera (1924), novel
Juarez and Maximilian (1925), play
Paul Among the Jews: A Tragedy (1926), play
The Man Who Conquered Death (*Der Tod des Kleinbürgers*) (1928), short story
Class Reunion (*Der Abiturententag*) (1928), novel
The Forty Days of Musa Dagh (1933; revised and expanded edition, 2012), novel
Listen to the Voice, also as *Jeremiah* (*Höret die Stimme*, or *Jeremias*) (1937), novel
Embezzled Heaven (*Der veruntreute Himmel*) (1939), novel
The Song of Bernadette (1941), novel
Pale Blue Ink in a Lady's Hand (*Eine blass-blaue Frauenschrift*) (1941; 2012), novella
Jacobowsky und der Oberst (1944), play
Star of the Unborn (1945/46), science-fiction novel

At Old Railroad Stations

At these tiny old railroad stations,
Which my own train long ago left behind,
I fear for the pressing crush of people
Departing, who pass on this stretch of track.

And I would like to see myself rise
Above the ones waiting on the platform,
So that I am as far as I can be now
On my journey in this rattlebox life,

So that I know bridges and tunnels,
The sea-, lake-, rock-, and cityscapes,
So my eyes and ears are pierced with knowing,
With those unknown in their seats,

So that they'll still be sitting in Times' train,
Brooding at the window, watching sparks fly
And the flashing of the tragic signals,
When I long got off at the destination.

Franz Werfel

Dance Of Death

Death has taken me out for a swing.
At first I didn't drop from the quickstep
In his dance and clogged right along
Until he drove the tempo up.

How swiftly was I pulled into being
The jumping jack, the dancing chicken,
Becoming nothing but a scream to God
With no hope of what He was thinking.

Then Death lifted me up high and spun me
Into the sky so God would be pleased with him,
For he doesn't take what God doesn't give.

But suddenly he let his catch fall,
For in the alphabet of the first silence,
God has just two words for him: Not today!

Franz Werfel

Das Bleibende

Solang noch der Tatrwind leicht
slowakische Blumen bestreicht,
so lang wirken Mädchen sie ein
in trauliche Buntstickerei'n.
Solang noch im bayrischen Wald
die Axt im Morgengraun hallt,
so lang auch der Einsame sitzt,
der Gott und die Heiligen schnitzt.
Solang auf ligurischer Fahrt
das Meer seine Fischer gewahrt,
so lang wird am Strand es schaun
die spitzenklöppelnden Fraun.
Ihr Völker der Erde, mich rührt
das Bleibende, das ihr vollführt.
Ich selbst, ohne Volk, ohne Land,
stütz' nun meine Stirn in die Hand.

Franz Werfel

Dead Friend Of My Youth

Now when you come all that way to meet me
From the country house of your death,
I know that you would remove your hat
To greet someone already old to you.

You'd only half recognize this gentleman
Whose face has become so very different.
But to me you'd burn in that former pureness
Kept young by death, a light out of boyhood.

If you would suddenly deign not to dissolve
Your highness and withdraw from my presence,
Perhaps I could simply just close my eyes then,
Perhaps I could also get down on my knees.

Franz Werfel

I'm Still Just a Child

O Lord, tear me to pieces.
I'm still just a child.
And dare to sing
And call upon you
And tell you about things:
We are.

I open my mouth
Before you unleash your agonies upon me.
I have my health
And have no idea how old men rust away,
I've never braced myself against the posts
The way women do for hours.

I never push myself through the tired night
Like truly august droshky nags
That long escaped their background,
(Amid that enchanting, dashing sound
Of lady's footsteps and all, something laughs) .
I never pushed myself like hacks trotting on ad infinitum.

I was never the sailor when the oil's extinguished,
When the water rushing in sneers at the sun,
When the distress shot thunders,
When the rocket convulses upward.
I never dropped myself, to make it up to you,
On my knees, Lord, with a last world prayer.

I was never a child crushed in the fabric
Of this miserable time, a little arm all bandaged.
I have never starved inside the asylum,
Don't know how mothers stitch the eyes,
All of you, those who die, I don't know how you die!

But You, Lord, came down for me too.
And you found the thousandfold torments,
You delivered in every woman,
You died in the shit, in every piece of paper,
You were mistreated in every circus seal,
And you were some cavalier to a whore.

Lord, tear me to pieces.
Why this dull, miserable delicacy?
I'm not worth what flowed from your wounds.
Bless me with mortifications, prick after prick.
I want the death of the whole world included.
Lord, tear me to pieces.

Until I'm dead in every shred first,
Worked to death in every dog, every horse,
And dying of thirst, a soldier in the desert,
Until, poor sinner I, painfully tasted the sacrament on my

tongue,
Till I'm this eaten body stretched out on a bitter bed,
Taking the form that I mocked, courted.

And only when I'm scattered to the wind,
Plunge from each death, from each life,
Then, Lord, torch me in the thorns.
I'm your child.
Then, Word, sizzle skyward, that I can tell I need,
Burn inconsumable through the universe: We are! !

Franz Werfel

Morning Hymn

I am not dead. Through slit and crack
The piercing ray only glanced me,
And in the glow of self-possession
I survive once more once again.

Through open shutters with waves surges
A blue that does not look blue to me.
Like a baby the air's nursed itself
Full of the sun's milk that melts down.

On the sea a steamer's whistle
Blows like a rutting stag.
From mountains flashes a secret army's
Visible-invisible birth.

I am not dead. I'd like to shout loud
On this day of who gets mercy,
That today each of my sails fills
Themselves once more once again.

Franz Werfel

One Hour Ater The Dance Of Death

I lay in the abyss, where twisting squeezing
The lowest form of life pushed itself peristaltically.
Where slippery and slimy worm and eel entwined,
I was a worm myself, overwhelmed with exhaustion.

This lasted an eon before I succeeded,
And one of my senses could slowly lift itself up,
The sense of hearing. Listening, it scouted out if
The dancer, Death, had finally waltzed into the distance.

I eavesdrop breathless. Then a sparkling chromatic scale
Flows wanly from the open window next door.
Maybe Death is sitting there tuning his piano.

And while my life enjoys zestfully eating and fills with gas,
I feel him lean in that requisite little side room,
Where he invisibly reads, rustling the evening paper.

Franz Werfel

Six Septets To Honor The Spring Of 1905

Maria Immisch was the springtime.
With feeling and reverence
I snatch her adored name from the underworld.
When I was fifteen in '05, that year
—they celebrated the big Schiller centennial
—and I saw her as heroine in his famous plays.
To this day my heart's still thankful.

The city park was already dense in leaf.
The lilacs beckoned. I was allowed
Entry into the Classical Theater.
I sat in the overpacked balcony.
She stood inflamed with her stage magic presence
While a storm of emotions raged through my fresh heart
As did the song of Schiller's iambs.

Her hair was black. Her eyes were blue.
She played girl, child, and lady
In peplum, petticoat, Stuart collar, cloak.
She spoke the words in a dark contralto.
She strode and suffered and died, her character on air.
She was that woman. She was my dear and holy faith,
The one who pierced the invulnerable me.

The spring named Maria Immisch
Showed me the way to this far shore.
She was the springtime. But I was in bloom.
I became dead quiet. Life was too big.
My hopeless case was at school
For I studied her picture all the live-long day
Painfully healthy, so blissfully sick.

That night I fled from the house
And stood with that cuffed bouquet,
Lacking the audacity, outside the stage door.
She came out with a gentleman trimmed in fur,
She was the star of the city, she was a star.
In utter silence I retreated with my flowers from that place
Almost relieved that I had failed.

The night was moon-white in the park.
I tossed those flowers in the pond.
There they floated. I didn't mean it to be symbolic.
My heart wasn't hurt, wasn't greedy for pain.
For the first time I had an inkling of warm tears,
That we only get what we never get.
Maria Immisch, the spring '05, be thanked.

Franz Werfel

The Creature's Stare

You stroke the fur of the big fine dog.
Looking way down into its eyes, you speak,
Pointing out for me the enormous sorrow
That's continuously fixed upon us.

When angels look deep in men's eyes,-
I replied-beneath their noble brows,
They will ask about the same thing in dismay
And turn away for they cannot bear it.

Franz Werfel

The Faithful One

So many play with you,
You play with the many,
But you never see me
There in the background,
By you around the clock
With my frozen-up mouth
And my iron-hard face.

Those you gladly amuse,
They make things work smoothly,
They don't get in my way.
There's always someone new,
And there's no one I shun,
For I'm the faithful one,
And you I can bet on.

Once you become old hat,
Passé, of no interest,
And no one's around you,
Then I'll turn to you,
To earn and to end,
And in my firm hands
I'll carry you over my dark sea.

Franz Werfel

The Patient

The patient looks out into the garden burning
With Christmas* stars of vermillion fire.
They flower, he feels, nicely on that bush together,
But he is no longer akin to himself.

Timidly he plumbs his inhalations night and day,
Sinking into that inner circle of being him.
Has he ever breathed without doubt?
How strange that now he thinks each breath.

People are so dear and ill-timed.
They offer their care, which lingers.
The patient is ashamed because of that stress
Which accentuates all talk of hope.

On his blanket lies the morning paper
With a giant headline screaming.
From the corner of his eye the patient reads
What already escapes his memory.

What, bombs, hecatombs slaughtered, downfalls
Of people and cities, early and evening?
Is this the world then? —The ego is a throng
Of identity burst long ago.

The I is like one of those swarms of bees,
Pendent, ready to fly, relocate ...
It is filled with only one desire: For warmth,
And unmindful as forever is.

Franz Werfel

The Ram

(An interpretation of a Jewish face)

You've inherited the great ram's features,
The black-wooled one that bred with Jacob's herds.
You found yourself enough in the desert,
On the thistleweed that bent in the wind.

When the shepherd called, you fine animal,
You came skipping, your high heart pounding.
You pranced and pawed the ground with your hooves,
Which now is your tendency to make jokes.

But when the warrior with his steel honor
Climbed his horse and poked out his lance,
You timidly forced yourself back into your fold
And baaed there quietly and without hope.

Franz Werfel

The Snowfall

Oh the slow fall of snow,
Its unending blanketing swirl!
Yet my mind's eye was giving shape
To what couldn't be kept hidden,
That in the white drifts each fleck
Is known, weighed, counted.

Oh you spinning dancing flakes,
Your tiny souls and personalities
Withstand gravity, weightlessness, wind,
In your coming and going
I see your destinies glide down,
Which you begin, fulfill, begin . . .

This one falls soft and like wool,
The next is crystal and tenacious,
The third's a clenched fist of struggle.
Yet their white realm disperses by morning,
Thus one doesn't die from the rest,
And they dissolve into the purest drop shapes.

Oh the world's slow falling snow,
That race's dense, blanketing swirl!
It perishes and not one fate melts alone.
We melt, but we are left behind
When death, the way spring wind thaws, overtakes
Us drops and comes together home in the womb.

Franz Werfel