

Sea and Sky as Primordial Elements in Platen's *Sonette aus Venedig*

See und Himmel als Urelemente in Platens Sonette aus Venedig

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KEYWORDS:

*Platen, Venice, Primordial,
Sea, Refugee*

STICHWÖRTER:

*August von Platen,
Venedig, Urgottheiten, See,
Land, Flüchtlinge*

ABSTRACT

Venice might be thought of as a location between land and water, but the land-water surface of Venice is a work of art, not earth. The building of this surface upon stilts began during the period of Barbarian invasions of Rome in the fifth and sixth centuries, by refugees from the mainland who in time established a Republic that lasted over a thousand years. August von Platen visited Venice 27 years after the Republic's capitulation, while it was under Austrian occupation. Sonette aus Venedig weaves an aesthetic fugue of sea and sky as primordial elements (with minimal but noteworthy references to land), to offer Venice up as heavenly Aphrodite, the personification of the beautiful work of art. But art no longer mediates between humanity and divinity, and the heavenly beauty seems to survive in echoes, shadows, and dreams. The cycle also offers reflection on the image of the refugees, not washing up on the shore, but fleeing from land to sea, to build a conduit for tradition during a barbarian rupture.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Venedig kann als Ort zwischen Land und Wasser gedachte werden, doch die Land-Wasser-Oberfläche Venedigs ist ein Kunstwerk, keine Erde. Der Bau dieser auf Stelzen errichteten Fläche begann während der Zeit der Völkerwanderungen im fünften und sechsten Jahrhundert durch mutige Flüchtlinge vom Festland, die schließlich eine über tausend Jahre währende Republik gründeten. August von Platen besuchte Venedig 27 Jahre nach der Kapitulation der Republik, als die Stadt unter österreichischer Besatzung stand. Sonette aus Venedig (1824)

erschaffen eine ästhetische Fuge aus Meer und Himmel als Urelementen (mit wenigen, aber bemerkenswerten Bezügen zum Land), um Venedig als himmlische Aphrodite, die Personifizierung des vollkommenen Kunstwerks, darzustellen. Doch die Kunst vermittelt nicht mehr zwischen Menschen und Göttlichkeit, und die himmlische Schönheit scheint nur in Echos, Schatten und Träumen fortzuleben. Der Zyklus regt auch zum Nachdenken über das Bild der Flüchtlinge an, die nicht an den Strand gespült wurden, sondern vom Land aufs Meer flohen, um inmitten des barbarischen Einbruchs einen Weg zur Fortführung der Tradition zu finden.

SEA AND SKY

Platen's *Sonette aus Venedig* (1825) were largely written in the fall of 1824, during the poet's two-month visit to the lagoon islands, which were at the time under Austrian occupation, some 27 years after Napoleon had put an end to the storied 1100-year-old Republic. That republic, built on stilts in the marshes, had been founded by refugees who were fleeing uncertain times on mainland Italy during the Barbarian invasions of the 5th and 6th centuries. Platen depicts an occupied city, where the once *Serene* Republic is slowly fading from the living memory. This decline is reflected in the displacement of Venetian art and in the repurposing of spaces such as palaces and temples into hotels, museums, art dealerships, and tourist shops, alongside Venice's vanishing as a living work of art. Platen begins by telling the story of the birth of Venice as Venus in the first sonnet, her ascent to heaven throughout the cycle, and the echoes and reflections that are the only things remaining from it, barely discernable in the darkness described in the last sonnet of the cycle.

In the epigrammatic dedication of the cycle, Platen gives the first indication of how he wants his Venice to be understood: as an island city foamed by the sea: *Inselstadt vom Meer beschäumet* (PLATEN 1982: 402).

In Plato's *Symposium* (PLATO 2022: 169, 180d), Pausanias distinguishes the higher *Aphrodite Ourania* (Ἀφροδίτη Οὐρανία, Venus of Uranus) from the common one, *Aphrodite Pandemos* (Πάνδημος). The latter appears in Homer and Sappho as the daughter of Zeus and Dione and as an inspirer of wanton, lustful desire and conquest. She stirs the creation of beautiful jewelry in her metallurgical-artist Titan husband Hephaestus (Vulcan); yet she is regularly unfaithful to him, most notably with the brutish warrior Ares (Mars).

The other version of Aphrodite, the heavenly one, according to Hesiod's *Theogony* (HESIOD 2018: 173-207), was born of the sea foam (ἀφρογενέα), from which she derives the first part of her name, ἀφρός. The foam floating on the violently surging sea (πόντω) issued from the severed genitals of the primordial Sky, Οὐρανός (Uranus) – the raining, giving, yet overwhelmingly excessive Sky, who had been emasculated by his own son Cronus (Κρόνος) at the behest of both Uranus, and Cronus' mother and mate, *Mother Earth*, Terra-Tellus, Γαῖα.¹

¹ With Κρόνος, etymology becomes more problematic. While there has been a prevalent tradition of associating it with the concept of Time, χρόνος (with a hard Kh), Plato's Socrates in *Cratylus* argues for an etymology derived from κόπος, offspring, and νοῦς, Geist, mind-spirit.

This heavenly Aphrodite, with whom Platen's Venice seeks to be associated, has two primordial fathers, Sky (Οὐρανός, Uranus) and Sea (Πόντος, Pontus), and no mother. Pausanias invokes this genealogy in the *Symposium* to argue for his preference for this higher Aphrodite over the common one. In this sense, Platen's Venice can be framed, at least in the opening sonnet of the cycle, as a metaphoric celebration of its author's homoerotic disposition.

At the same time, Hesiod tells us that although this heavenly Aphrodite was accompanied, from her nautical birth to her ascent to Olympus, by primordial Love and Desire (Ἔρως and Ἴμερος), what she offers mortals and immortals alike is not primarily carnal, whether homoerotic or heteroerotic, but rather, "maidenly whispers and smiles and deceits and sweet delight and fondness and gentleness" (HESIOD 2018 : 205-206).

This chaste, virginal communion in gentle lighthearted, if not always sincere flirtation in turn engenders in men the creation of beautiful, noble, and fine (καλός) works of art. These noble artists and creators of beautiful things would certainly have been predominantly male in Greece. The focus, however, would have rested on their creative and artistic production, rather than their sexual relations – which would admittedly be non-procreative.

Platen's Venus-Venice, then, is neither merely a metaphor for homoerotic love, nor simply a titanic *techno-sphere* (τέχνη-σφαίρα) situated between hydrosphere and atmosphere, a sort of futuristic, man-made structure rising from the water toward heaven in a post-apocalyptic aquatic world overrun by displaced refugees.

It can rather be said to stand for a *callis-technical sphere*, καλές-τέχνες-σφαίρα; a once robust (as evidenced by the artworks woven into the core of the cycle) and now fading sphere of the fine arts. The cycle emerges with primordial, Greco-Roman imagery, reaches for heavenly highs with renaissance Christian art, and ultimately returns to a primordial darkness without a way out.

But what does it mean to say that the beautiful work of art is a product of Sky and Sea and only minimally of Land? What, furthermore, does Platen's cycle suggest about Venice as a work of art in situ exactly 200 years ago? And finally, what might it offer to our Anthropocene era?

GROUNDLESS ART

Through the first sonnet's octave (XVIII)², manifestations of water, *das hohe Meer, die Flut, die Wellen, die Lagune*, appear not as menacing or ominous, but in playful, true and trusted communion with Venice's architectural masterpieces, *Palladios Tempel, der Dogen alte Säulengänger, Seufzerbrücke*.

In the first quatrain, the high sea currents seem protective, as they carry us, *uns getragen*, toward our destination. They are the same faithful waves that nestle, almost mischievously, on the temples, whose pediments appear as the first signs of Venice at her parturition, as Venus of the Sky rising out of the Sea primevally. "Als aus der Flut Palladios Tempel stiegen, / An deren Staffeln sich die Wellen schmiegen," (PLATEN 1982: 377; XVIII, Q1, L2-3).

This image of Venice as a non-consumable beauty arising from water is reinforced in the cycle's tenth sonnet (XXVI), where the first quatrain likens Venice, which is understood as a work of art, to a tulip — a flower that blossoms in many vivid colors but lacks scent and thus cannot be sensually consumed, only visibly enjoyed:

Hier wuchs die Kunst wie eine Tulipane,
Mit ihrer Farbenpracht dem Meer entstiegen,
Hier scheint auf bunten Wolken sie zu fliegen,
Gleich einer zauberischen Fee Morgane. (PLATEN 1982: 381; XXVI, Q1)

Venice, as the embodiment of beautiful splendor, emerges out of the Sea and immediately appears to soar on colorful clouds in the Sky. The heavenly, *Uranian* aspect of the tulip appears starker when set beside the sweet-smelling rose. The cycle's twelfth sonnet opens by saying about Venice: "Hier seht ihr freilich keine grünen Auen, / Und könnt euch nicht im Duft der Rose baden [...]" (PLATEN 1982: 383; XXIX, Q1, L1-2). When referring to the scentless tulip, furthermore, the Sky elements (*Wolken* and *fliegen*) reflect upon water as a mirage, a flying ship or floating castle, visible yet mysteriously out of reach, and thus inspiring.

This flying, transcendental element is, at first, introduced in the second quatrain of the first sonnet where the inner rhyme brings together movement and

² Platen's sonnets are cited using their Roman numerals in Link and Wölfel edited *Werke I*, 1982, where the 14 sonnets under the subheading "Venedig" appear in their final arrangement as edited by Platen himself in 1834, followed by the number of the quatrain (Q1 or 2) or tercet (T1 or 2) as well as the cited line (L, Arabic numerals).

stasis, *flying back* and *remaining*. “Und die Lagune scheint zurückzuflieden, / Der Dogen alte Säulengänge liegen” (PLATEN 1982: XVIII, 372; Q2, L2-3). This sky-water blending leads then into the volta, where St. Mark’s Lion (itself a fantastic idea) is encountered in the shape of an ore-winged statue of a lion:

Venedigs Löwen, sonst Venedigs Wonne,
Mit ehrnen Flügeln sehen wir ihn ragen
Auf seiner kolossalischen Kolone. (PLATEN 1982: 378; XVIII, T1)

The statue of the Lion of St. Marks on one of the pillars in St. Mark’s Square is an ancient composite work that has gone through many transformations.³ It was last reassembled after having been shattered into pieces in Paris where it had been carried off by Napoleon as loot. Yet, despite its fragmented material integrity, the Lion’s wings are described with the Lutheran-biblical adjective, *ehrn*: solid, original, ore-pure bronze.

In the second quatrain of an alternate unpublished version of this sonnet, the bronze statue even appears to fly:

Geflügelt steht, doch ohne Falsch und Tücke,
Venedigs Löwe, sonst gewohnt zu siegen,
Entgegen scheint er unserem Schiff zu fliegen,
Und die Lagune weicht im Fluge zurücke. (PLATEN 1982: 862)

Here, both the lagoon and the bronze statue are endowed with flight. The transcendental signification of the artwork is not subject to its corporeal solidity or cohesion, so long as it remains situated in its intended location and oriented toward its intended audiences. The cycle’s fifth sonnet, in yet another reference to Napoleon’s termination of the Republic, reformulates this essence of the artwork:

Die ehrnen Hengste, die durch saltz’ge Schäume
Dahergeschleppt, auf jener Kirche ragen;
Nicht mehr dieselben sind sie, ach! Sie tragen
Des korsikan’schen Überwinders Zäume. (PLATEN 1982: 380; XXII, Q2)

³ In fact, this artistic element is never authentic. The origin of the lion statue goes back perhaps to the third or fourth century before Christ in Hellenistic or Persian Ionia, or perhaps even before then to Assyria (WILLIS 1999: 45-49). It is not clear when it was brought to Venice but was certainly not St. Mark’s lion at its inception.

The difference here lies between being dragged through foam and being bridled; the original, honorable, *ehern*, steeds were looted from Constantinople during the Venice-sponsored Fourth Crusade (1204) and transported *by water*, while their post-Napoleonic placeholders were installed after the Greek horses had been bridled and taken to Paris *over land*. The Venetians of the Republic proudly displayed their spoils, whereas now, the returned loot from Paris is protected from the elements in the Basilica's basement. The replica horses on display would do.

At the same time, there is something in art, made by the *heavenly* Aphrodite, that exists regardless of its current function, whether as an Assyrian idol or Christian iconography, so long as these worlds are still *im Werden*, ongoing. This expansion of the tradition through art is something that becomes most explicit in the tenth sonnet, by the end of the which the poet wants to evangelize art into every belief system, invoking paintings at the outermost edges of the Christian tradition: *Alexander and Darius' Family* (Greeks in Mesopotamia), *Tobias and the Angel* (Jews in Media), and *St. Barbara* (Romans in the Levant):

Um Gottes eigene Glorie zu schweben
 Vermag die Kunst allein und darf es wagen,
 Und wessen Herz Vollendetem geschlagen,
 Dem hat der Himmel weiter nichts zu geben! (PLATEN 1982: 382;
 XXVII, Q2)

God's glory is a distinctly Judeo-Christian formulation of perfection, which Platen considers attainable only through art; not through grounded facts but in *schweben*, floating on the water and hovering in the sky around it. And once a heart has responded to this art of beauty-inspired perfection, *the heavenly Aphrodite*, it no longer needs heaven, *Uranius*.

LAND OF DREAMS

Venice in Platen's cycle frequently evokes Venus in its primordial connections to the heavenly Sky and the primordial Sea, poised between liquidity and airiness. But terrestrial land and earth signifiers oscillate between nervousness of the first step onto the *Dogado* in the first sonnet, and the dreamy and metaphorical.

The arrival, *landen an*, the docking at the onset of the first sonnet's second quatrain, is deemed beholden to *dem Glücke*, Τύχη, Fortuna.⁴ Yet the actual landing occurs in the final tercet:

Ich steig ans Land, nicht ohne Furcht und Zagen,
 Da glänzt der Markusplatz im Licht der Sonne:
 Soll ich ihn wirklich zu betreten wagen? (PLATEN 1982: 387; XVIII, T2)

Das Auge, “the eye” that starts the whole cycle has, by the end of the first sonnet, turned into an anxious “I” at landing, at the convergence of the terrestrial, aerial, and aquatic elements, with the moist surface of the *Piazzetta* glistening in the direct morning sunlight from the east. But this is not quite land.

The Venetian Republic had three types of possessions: *Stato da Terra*, mainland territories on the solid ground, *Stato da Màr*, their maritime colonies at sea, and the *Dogado* (Venice, Murano, and Lido), its liminal center, neither solid ground nor sea. Thus, in the first sonnet, we do not actually set foot on solid land. In the cycle, solid land is only feared, never entered. Just after the halfway mark, echoing the fact that Platen himself had expected to stay in Venice half as long as he finally did, the poet says: “Hör ich Fusina, hör ich Mestre nennen, / So scheint ein Frost mir durch die Brust zu schleichen” (PLATEN 1982: 381; XXV, Q1, L3-4). Most notably, the only reference to actual solid ground, *terra firma*, in the cycle is accompanied by a waft of deadly cold.

At the same time, land follows a metaphorical trajectory from the first line of the fifth sonnet, “Venedig liegt nur noch im Land der Träume” (PLATEN 1982: 379; XXII, Q1, L1) to the eleventh, which traces *John the Baptist in the Desert*, deep into Titian's heart. The sonnet ends with this tercet:

O goldne Zeit, die nicht mehr ist im Werden,
 Als noch die Kunst vermocht die Welt zu lehren,
 Und nur das Schöne heilig war auf Erden!

⁴ A sometime tutelary goddess, daughter of Oceanus and his consort Tethys, continued to gain in prominence during the Hellenistic Age as the Greek pantheon was generally in decline. Often represented blindfolded with a cornucopia or a ship's rudder or her famous wheel, she even survived the Christianization of Rome within the scholastic tradition. Travelers to Venice by sea would encounter her just before landing, just as Platen had, in the shape of a weathervane atop a globe held by Atlas above the Venetian customs office/salt warehouse where the Grand Canal meets the Giudecca.

So, the connection to Earth goes from nervousness to frost; and from Venice only existing in dreams to John the Baptist seeking solitude in a golden age, when Aphrodite alone was holy upon Gaia. Art reveals an element of continuity that goes beyond traditions.

ELEVATE AND ORIENT

The disorienting sensation of landing at the end of the first sonnet lingers as a labyrinthine riddle in the first quatrain of the second, before it is overcome by the octave's end, when a discerning perspective is acquired from atop St. Mark's Campanile through the establishment of both topological and human coordinates.

Ich grüße dort den Ozean, den blauen,
Und hier die Alpen, die im weiten Bogen
Auf die Laguneninseln niederschauen. (PLATEN 1982: 378; XIX, T1)

Both the islands and the mountains belong to the geosphere, but they occupy its extreme ends: the lagoon islands at sea-level on the one hand, and, on the other, peaks that seem to hold up the sky.

But the body of water that the speaker greets is neither the lagoon nor the primordial Sea, Pontus, but rather, the ocean, *den blauen, the blue*. The adjective blue links the vastness of the ocean to the boundlessness of the sky, far away from the Alps at the edge of the horizon.

Gaia as Terra Mater, the Earth, brought forth both *Pontus*—which mainly refers to the *Mediterranean Sea* and out of which Aphrodite would have arisen—and *Oceanus*, the source of all freshwater rivers that encircles the Earth herself, at the edge of the unknown and the uncanny Tartarus.⁵

Procuring freshwater away from mainland was in fact one of the greatest challenges that Venice faced from the start and is one of the measures by which

⁵ About the parentage of Oceanus, Ὠκεῖνός, we have from Hesiod, that Gaia “having bedded with Sky, she bore deep-eddying Ocean.” As opposed to the body of water into which previously, Uranus’ genitals had fallen, Pontus. Gaia “[...] bore the barren sea seething with its swell, Pontus [...] without delightful love[.]” (HESIOD 2018:130-135). Next to Eros, Earth’s fellow primordial elements were Void (χάος, chaos), Deep Abyss (Τάρταρος, the fiery depths of the Earth beyond the Sea), Night (Νύξ, Nyx) and Darkness (Erebus Ἐρεβος). Eros is the element that has caused the intermingling of the other ones.

the courage and ingenuity of the lagoon's first people can be judged. They initially had to transport their drinking water from the mainland and later developed complex cisterns and water purification systems.

Greeting the ocean from atop St. Mark's Campanile, from which, at best, the Adriatic Sea may be seen, is a performative, hopeful gesture, articulating a vision of unending sky and sea merging in the blue. But the cycle is mainly concerned with the people who fashioned this man-made land: a people who, for centuries, boasted an independent, exulted, and feared Republic.

Und sieh! Da kam ein mut'ges Volk gezogen,
Paläste sich und Tempel sich zu bauen
Auf Eichenpfählen mitten in die Wogen. (PLATEN 1982: 378; XIX, T2)

From atop the Campanile, with mountains in the north on the one hand, and the sea to the east and the south, the poem now directs the reader's gaze westward toward the Italian peninsula.

The marshlands were turned into solid platforms for heavy construction by generations of refugees from the mainland who originally sought shelter in the undesirable swamps from the lawless barbarians who had come from beyond the Alps in the north. These refugees were not fleeing a fight; the battlefield had long since been lost by Rome. Rather, they were taking refuge in the lagoons away from lawlessness, which is the source of servitude.

Their courage, which is highlighted by Platen here, consisted in boldly forging new paths where none seemed imaginable; not just for temporary shelter, but as a platform upon which to build splendid art. The choice, then, was between the submission to chaos and savagery on the one side and the courage to make from nothing its very opposite on the other: a noble Republic as a work of art, set amidst the currents, *mitten in die Wogen*. This is not landed aristocracy; it is nobility without land.

HUMANS OF VENICE

Having established Venice's coordinates geospatially and mythological-historically, the cycle's third sonnet (XX) turns the poetic gaze first outward to sea and then immediately inward, seeking to locate its own place among the

Venetians. The Venetians view the odd German poet as *den Grillenfänger*, the mope; and he in turn sees them as *die Müßiggänger*, the loafers. The impulse for this reflection is the mirror-flat equilibrium observed out at sea during the golden hour, after the heat of the day has subsided and the lagoon has immersed itself onto itself, as the byword of reflection, cleansing Venice in gentle oscillations, like a daily baptism.

Wie lieblich ist's, wenn sich der Tag verkühlet,
Hinaus zu sehen, wo schiff und Gondel schweben,
Wenn die Lagune, ruhig, spiegeleben,
In sich verfließt, Venedig sanft umspület! (PLATEN 1982: 378; XX, Q1)

While water and sky imagery drift and soar through the Venice sonnets, the thrust of the cycle is an elaborate treatment of Venetian art and Venice as art in situ. Its aim is to discover and establish human contact with the living embodiments of the once-great Venetians, portrayed as sitters for Biblical and Greco-Roman figures in these masterpieces, figures who may still occasionally be spotted around the city. But the ultimate aim of Platen's *Venice Sonnets* is to sing their way into the hearts of the artists-creators of Venice, looking for the very act of creation itself, which leads them into the heart of the artist-creator par excellence. Ποίησις, poiesis, whence we get poetry, is *creation*.

Yet this Quixotesque endeavor exposes the degree to which these artworks have already been severed from their intended location and occasion, and as such also from the people in whom they were meant to awaken empathy, and, through it, anagogic edification. The cycle traces how the fine, the good, and the beautiful, the καλός artifact of τέχνη, ceases to mediate between άνθρωπος, *anthropos* and θεός, *theos*. This gradual ineffectiveness of art heralds the same for God and mankind.

Far from a detached scholarly investigation, however, the cycle also includes evidence of an actual love (with the Nobile Piruli) in the cycle's penultimate sonnet. Here, we find one of the most explicit articulations of the impossibility of mediation, perpetuated to *every night*: "Kein Mittel giebt's, das mich dir näher brächte, / Und einsam siehst du meine Tritte wanken / Den Markus auf und nieder alle Nächte" (PLATEN 1982: 384; XXX, T2).

The cycle ultimately returns to the primordial Sea, Darkness (Ερεβος) and Night (Νύχ): first to the quietly trembling, desolate waves (PLATEN 1982: 384;

XXXI, Q2, L2) and then out into the dark sea that no doge will ever again marry (T1, L2-3) as part of *Sposalizio del Mare* ceremony, to mark the occasion of the *Feast of the Ascension of Jesus Christ*. The event, which since the latter half of the twentieth century has been performed by the mayor of Venice, is neither a Greek primordial ritual nor a Christian one. It is more a show for tourists. Instead of its original purpose, it now testifies to the fact that there are no more doges, and the Serene Republic no longer exists. And finally, the cycle ends in the echo of a gondolier's call:

Dann stört mich kaum im schweigenden Reviere,
Herschallend aus entlegenen Kanälen,
Von Zeit zu Zeit ein Ruf der Gondoliere.
(PLATEN 1982: 384; XXXI, T2)

This call cannot be deciphered, because it is too far removed from thinking in words; it is a thought in tones. Platen explains in the “Glosse” of his later drama *Der romantische Ödipus* (1829):

Süße Liebe denkt in Tönen,
Denn Gedanken stehn zu ferne,
Nur in Tönen mag sie gerne
Alles, was sie will verschönen.
(PLATEN 1982: 291)

This invisible and indecipherable remainder constitutes the final trace of beautiful Venice. Through the cycle's closed structure, one that never names the poet from outside the sonnets themselves, this remnant echoes us back from the darkness of the final sonnet back to the brightness of the first. Even so, the message remains the same: the withering of the relevance of the fine arts, along with Venice itself, as a world that endured for an eon.

Platen's *Sonnets* offer our Anthropocene—between semi-organic humanity and artificial intelligence—a look back on an epoch of a different, gradually fading anthroposphere: a liminal epoch in which art functioned as an aesthetic mediator of human sentiment, situated between a long period during which beauty structured human experience and a rapidly intensifying era of technical and technological advancement, which would lead to a slow withdrawal of

beauty from all cultural and communal spaces that regulate the spiritual sphere of human existence. The slow erosion of beauty's relevance mirrors the rapid ascendancy of technology and the conceptualization of inhumanity.

At the same time, the cycle also offers a different frame for the conceptualization of a type of refugee. Here the refugee is not one who seeks solid land and existing infrastructures as shelter from their sea of troubles; instead, he is inspired by the water-sky spirit that informs all fine arts and flees the lawless solid ground, to float and hover, and to create *beautiful* infrastructures and spaces that have never existed before. This kind of refugee is one who is always-already free.

In his papers from 1833 Platen explains the *wonder* of Venice in terms of the interwovenness of freedom and art:

Hier ist die Freiheit nicht entsprungen aus Ruin,
Kein Wütrich ward erdolcht, vertrieben kein Tarquin:
Nie wohnten Sklaven hier, und der Erste, der begann
Die Lagunen anzubauen, war schon ein freier Mann.
Von Leben wimmelten bald des öden Meers Gebreite,
Denn wo die Freiheit wandelt, geht ihr die Kunst zur Seite [...]
(PLATEN 1982: 424)

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