In this rereading of Wilhelm Raabe’s Zum wilden Mann (1874) I argue that the author invented in the guise of a universal fable an alternative story to the self-congratulatory visions of Germany current after unification in 1871. Furthermore, by choosing to re-publish the tale in 1885 in Reclam’s Universalbibliothek, he afforded this alternative story wide circulation and canonical status. The juxtaposition in this text of the choleric executioner-mercenary, who in the role of the wild man tends to communal well-being in the name of the state, with the melancholy apothecary, who blindly and ineffectually tends to communal health, reveals that the social and economic order preserved in the new Reich is constituted and maintained by violence. With this harrowing insight the story thus launches its own violent address to its reading public by leaving readers in an unclosed narrative frame in the apothecary shop, vainly awaiting solace and healing.

Was ist solch ein unbedeutendes Gemetzel wie bei Cannae, Leipzig oder Sedan gegen die fort und fort um den Erdball tosende Schlacht des Daseins? (Wilhelm Raabe, 8 March 1875)\(^1\)

[What is a bloodbath like that in the case of Cannae, Leipzig, or Sedan in comparison with the slaughter of existence that rages unceasingly around the globe?]

It is not the perversions of others that render our homespaces dangerous. It is those ritualized, moralizing, “elevated”, “innocent”, pathological responses that grant purified self-definition to our “ordered worlds” by locating the “demon” in others and exorcizing them from our midst.\(^2\)

In 1885 the short novel Zum wilden Mann entered the literary marketplace for the third time, this time as volume 2000 of Reclam’s Universalbibliothek. Its author, Wilhelm Raabe, had carefully selected it from his many works, excising it from the anthology Krähenfelder Geschichten, where it had been republished in 1879 following its initial serialized publication in Westermanns Monatshefte in 1874. This universal library in fact constituted a potentially significant venue for Zum wilden Mann, for it held out the promise of wide circulation in a series established to democratize literature by making it affordable

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even as it conserved Germany’s better literature as national literature. While Reclam included a wide range of fiction in this series, many volumes of which corresponded more to ephemeral popular taste than to a program of Bildung, each thousandth publication constituted a special place of honor dedicated to “den führenden Schriftstellern der Zeit, den Lieblingen eines literarisch anspruchsvollen Publikums” [“the leading writers of the time, the darlings of an audience with literary pretension”]. When in 1910 Reclam celebrated the publication of the 5000th volume of the Universalbibliothek, Raabe counted himself, not without a show of pride, among the signatories.

This choice of text for Reclam’s widely circulating series was a striking, even aggressive one, for, as has often been observed, Zum wilden Mann had met with criticism even from those otherwise disposed to praise Raabe’s work. Wilhelm Jensen for one had asserted in a lengthy review of Raabe’s entire oeuvre that Zum wilden Mann should be “polizeilich verboten” [“banned”]. In his view and that of others, the piece presented a shockingly bleak and disparaging – and thus misguided – vision of humankind, inappropriate to better literature. Indeed, Zum wilden Mann violated contemporary expectations of the function of literature as affirming reality, as providing a picture of a harmonious world (Otto Ludwig’s “poetic realism”), as offering Fontane’s “humoristische Verklärung” [“humorous transfiguration”], even an ideal world. The piece was, furthermore, difficult to read and thus hardly the stuff of popular consumption. The journalist Fritz Hartmann asked Raabe outright why he selected a work that could really only engage “an intellectual readership” for the mass distribution of the universal library. Raabe’s blunt answer, “Weil sie zu meinen besten Sachen gehört” [“Because it’s one of my best pieces”] (Ergänzungsband 4:242), in turn led Raabe editor Hans Butzmann to conclude that quality alone determined Raabe’s choice (11:480). While Butzmann may

7 Thaddäus Abitz-Schultze similarly recounts that he once asked Raabe why he had chosen “die so niederdrückende Novelle” and received the answer “Weil ich den ‘Wilden Mann’ für eine meiner besten Novellen halte” (Ergänzungsband 4. P. 294).