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German Literature

J. P. Stern

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

THE AGE to which these studies are devoted begins with the death of Goethe in 1832 and ends in the heyday of the Wilhelminian Empire. At the end of that era, in January 1912, Rilke wrote the invocatory opening stanzas of the first of his *Duino Elegies*; when, in February 1922, he triumphantly completed the tenth and last, another age had begun. Possessed of an historical consciousness second to no other poet's, Rilke in the compass of a few lines defines the condition under which the life of men is enacted in the modern world:

*. . . Ach, wen vermögen
wir denn zu brauchen? Engel nicht, Menschen nicht,
und die findigen Tiere merken es schon,
dass wir nicht sehr verlässlich zu Haus sind
in der gedeuteten Welt.*

*. . . But who, alas, is there
that we can use? Not angels, not men;
and the knowing animals are aware
that we are not very reliably at home
in the interpreted world.*

His words ring true to us. The insecure condition they describe we recognise as ours; it is taken for granted and enlarged on in W. B. Yeats's, Valéry's and T. S. Eliot's poetry, it encompasses W. H. Auden's; the grand edifice of Rilke's *Elegies* rests upon it. Yet while these lines project prophetically into the European twentieth century, they also summarize the German nineteenth. The conclusion to which the most characteristic works of nineteenth-century German prose have led me is that they are distinguished above all by their special combination of the prophetic and the archaic, of the existential and the parochial, of the elements of worldly innocence and reflective profundity. They

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[More information](#)

are almost always behind their times, and often peculiarly relevant to ours. And, as I see it, Rilke's lines, with all the 'contemporary' velleities they contain, amount to no less than a generalised setting-out of the theme of those works. If I have here concentrated on prose it is not because German poetry in the nineteenth century, from Hölderlin downwards, is irrelevant to my theme. It is merely because the poetic forms by their nature are less directly involved in the problems of realism which confronted the German writers of the age; and it is with this often unwilling involvement that I am here concerned.

I have called this book Re-interpretations for two reasons. First, because I see the prose-works which I have here considered as attempts at re-interpreting the world—at creating worlds—from points of view other than that of the common and commonly explored social certainties of their age; the world itself being presented in these writings not so much as a thing final and indisputably real but rather as in itself an 'interpretation'. And since the works discussed here do not readily adopt the mode of realism as that age (and largely also ours) conceived of it—sometimes the realism is directly challenged, sometimes it is silently by-passed, sometimes the writings are defeated by it—I have tried to suggest criteria, alternative to the common notion of realism, according to which the value of these writings, their especial charm and the weaknesses to which they are prone, may be more justly and fruitfully estimated.

In this second sense, too, what is offered here are re-interpretations. To present and evaluate these works, first, in accordance with one's understanding of the creative impulse to which they owe their existence and of the situation in which they are set—that is, in the light of what they are rather than in the light of what they are not—does not seem a very ambitious undertaking. Furthermore, to see them in the achieved round and as fully as possible (to see them also in the light of other literatures) seems a critical task no less obvious. Yet in attempting these two distinct and complementary tasks I have had less help from critics of the period than its voluminous bibliographies may suggest. Some of my fellow-critics, mainly German, are so deeply immersed in the ethos to which these works belong that they see in them not a

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

3

distinct tradition but simply a haven of spirituality, simply serene emblems of high-mindedness; and they have tended to take the question of specifically literary achievements for granted. At the opposite end of the scale are the more or less casual foreign readers or critics, so far away from it all that the bulk of nineteenth-century German literature (and its domestic criticism) appears to them merely archaic and provincial, at best 'quaint'. Then there are the Marxists: making their notion of 'socialist realism' the only valid criterion of literary merit, they have indeed gone roughshod over the ground. They have swept away many an overblown reputation (Storm's), ignored another (Stifter's), overestimated or distorted a third (Keller's). Yet it is they who recall to us that which the study of German literature has been prone to ignore—the social dimension of the literary work of art. So that, although their ideological barrage is often aimed at very modest targets, yet I have found them on occasion more helpful than their exaggerations, patent in both method and conclusions, led me to expect. Whereas about the New Critics, whose aims and procedures are diametrically opposed to the Marxists', it can, I think, be said that nineteenth-century narrative prose has brought out the worst in them. In extended prose especially, the inability to see the wood for the 'image-clusters' of the trees, the inability to hear the narrative voice for the 'sound-patterns' and 'murmuring üüü-vowels', has led to singularly absurd results.

I have no literary theory or critical method to offer. I have seen no reason to eschew biography, anecdote or historical considerations; avoiding neither philosophical argument nor Wilhelm Dilthey's notion of a '*Gründerlebnis*' ('central experience'), nor close attention to my author's words and imagery; choosing my manner in each chapter as seemed appropriate. The very notion of 'literature' could not be used at all rigidly where it was necessary to proceed with as few prepossessions as possible. The distinction between 'literature' and 'thought', by now a critical stereotype and the source of much pedantry, becomes less than self-evident where ideas are treated as living things. I have tried to keep the distinction relative, as I have the notion of realism—relative, that is, to the over-all creative achievement, which is, each time anew,

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

4

RE-INTERPRETATIONS

an exploration of human possibilities within a given historical setting.

The first draft of this book owes its origin to a course of lectures, some of them written in the usual weekly (and sometimes hectic) instalments. This procedure is not without its advantage, since it enables the writer to recall with some assurance that the similarity of the points made at each stage emerged gradually. As to the truth of the view presented here, therefore, I can at least claim that my central 'thesis' did not anticipate or determine the conclusions of each study. The late Ludwig Wittgenstein once compared the idea of a literary tradition to a hempen rope, where each short fibre overlapped a little, yet none reached from end to end; it is in this way that the studies of individual works are intended to contribute to and establish my central theme.

I have not attempted to write another history of nineteenth-century German literature, nor even of its prose. I have merely chosen a few representative examples of a literary tradition which I believe to be characteristically German, omitting many writings which seemed to me less interesting from my chosen point of view. Seeing in literature both a reflection and a source of social and national experience, I have suggested (where they seemed relevant) some of the reasons that make for the specific national character of the works interpreted in these pages. This has led me to consider several of the social and political facts which German literary historians have often either ignored or distorted. The claim that true literature, *Dichtung*, is a non-political thing few outside Germany have ever taken at its face-value. The common humanity and greatness of literary works, Goethe said more than once, can only lie in their specific character, of which their national origin is a part—sometimes an inconsiderable, at other times an important, part. And the claim that the true life of Germany is non-political—that too I have taken as part of the political atmosphere in which, both before and after 1848, much of German literature came to be written. The disastrous consequences of that 'non-political' attitude lie outside my present scope; yet their connection with the *Zeitgeist* I have tried to evoke in these pages is suggested more than once.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

5

Hostility to arguments with some claim to coherence, and the suspicion that they are just so many rope-tricks, is in the very air we breathe. The consistent debunking of all general ideas has created a mental climate in which it is hard to tell the right from the wrong ideas. More especially, it is a situation in which criticism (as men like Matthew Arnold, Nietzsche or Péguy conceived and practised it) finds itself restricted by arbitrary limitations. 'Historians', we are sometimes told, have available to them 'concrete evidence' for the existence of a tradition; and this evidence consists in the 'beliefs and practices handed down the generations'; whereas 'critics', so the argument runs, merely make up a 'tradition' as they go along. The distinction, it seems to me, is based on what Whitehead called the 'notion of misplaced concreteness'. For where else is a society's recognition of its own beliefs and practices to be found at its most explicit, at its most interesting, but in its literature? And is it not there that 'the historian' *and* 'the critic' may look for it? The difference between them lies in the different means they use for illuminating the lived past. But the source of the illumination—a sense for the coherence of the past—is the same for both. And the point at which they come closest to each other is precisely in literature—it is there that the beliefs and practices of a society become most articulate and may thus be made available to posterity by means of a coherent argument.

All literary criticism is beset by the twin hazards of aestheticism and historicism. Works of literature don't live in total isolation, as timeless images or 'ikons', but then again their value is not to be measured in the light of our worries and preoccupations. In the case of German literature especially, it is not always easy to let the work speak to the reader in its own voice and yet to remember that the voice is, after all, part of a conversation that is social and historical as well as literary. Yet this is where, to the present-day reader at all events, lie the challenge and the appeal of that literature. The following scene, suggested by one of Stifter's stories, may perhaps indicate the kind of experience my reader is invited to consider in the following pages.

Imagine a wanderer, the cares of his ordinary city life still

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

on his mind, arriving at a mountain hut to seek shelter for the night. The hut is clean and bare, a few pieces of ancient furniture stand in the room where he sits down. Tins and ingenious contraptions come out of his rucksack as he prepares his meal; all he requires from his solitary host is a little fresh water and a few slices of bread. While he bustles methodically with his precious accoutrements, offering this or that delicacy from his store, he notices his host's eyes, the poverty of the room. The exhilaration of his arrival dissolves as the embarrassment of possession, the shame of ownership before the tribunal of want, come over him and free him for an unaccustomed emotion. And he is stirred by the bareness and the truth of this scene in which he, a transitory guest burdened by many cares, will keep company with one who, for this night and thus in a sense for ever, is to be his bountiful host.

Perhaps my reader has found himself in such a situation; more likely he has not. Probably it will not strike him as revealing of the forces that agitate our contemporary world. But he cannot always see himself as part of that world. There are times when, however reluctantly, he is only himself, 'beyond the reach of common indication'. It is at such times that the truth of this scene may speak to him.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

I ANTECEDENTS AND COMPARISONS

I

AMONG THE casual visitors in Goethe's house on the Frauenplan in Weimar was a young and ambitious *savant*, Arthur Schopenhauer, who had been introduced there in 1813 by his highly articulate mother and sister. On his last visit, Schopenhauer took away with him in his autograph album an inscription which is more indicative of the poet's attitude to life than it is of the future pessimistic philosopher's: 'If in thine own worth thou wilt rejoice', Goethe had written, 'thou must endow the world with worth'¹—an exhortation which the young man is likely to have received with mixed feelings. By 1832, when Goethe died, Schopenhauer's *chef-d'œuvre*—in which those feelings were 'transfixed'²—had seen the light of a wholly incurious world for some fourteen years, and he had to wait another twenty before it would be accorded something of the importance he had never doubted was its due. What that book (and its systematic expansion in the second volume in 1844) contains is incomparably the most alluring, as it is the most comprehensive and detailed, re-interpretation of 'the world as an aesthetic phenomenon' the post-Goethean era (and European thought at any time) has to show. What, if anything, is Goethean about it? It certainly isn't Schopenhauer's intention in that work to 'endow the world with worth'. When we come to admire the high intelligence with which he describes

¹ 'Willst du dich deines Wertes freuen / So musst der Welt du Wert verleihen . . . / im Gefolg und zum Andenken mancher vertraulichen Gespräche. Weimar, den 8. Mai 1814. Goethe.' Quoted from Arthur Schopenhauer's *Sämtliche Werke*, (ed. E. Grisebach, Reclam) Vol. VI, Leipzig n.d., p. 186.

² See below, pp. 165–6.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

the independence and the self-contained sublimity of the work of art, when we observe how Nietzsche, in the 'seventies, at first follows Schopenhauer's analysis and evaluation of the rôle of art in experience, but then, with that sudden access of energy which is characteristic of his thinking, begins to question the truthfulness of the artistic process and turns upon the poet for being 'merely a liar, merely a fool', for artfully deceiving himself and the world; when, in brief, we find all the emphasis of later aesthetic thought placed *not* on the humanity and abundance of the creative imagination but on the limitations and exclusiveness, and the other-worldliness, of the aesthetic experience, the connection with Goethe looks thin. Yet I shall suggest that the truth of Goethe's classicism was achieved, not indeed by any pessimistic disparagement, but at the price of a considerable curtailment, of the actual world; and that the debt which he left behind grew larger as the age of prose—by contrast a prosy age indeed—imposed its conditions and demands.

Politics and social thinking are the chief victims of this process. The old Goethe is merely 'not very interested', Schopenhauer mordantly contemptuous. For Hegel, the 'real' world of contemporary politics comes to figure as an inopportune though alas necessary obstacle in the Spirit's process of self-realisation. With Nietzsche the Goethean reactions crystallise; the dichotomy 'Germany *versus* the West' hardens; he admires the French political imagination, but regards it as something alien to the German ethos. The nationalist writers of the Wilhelminian era¹ endlessly reiterate the need for loyalty and for faith in the nation, adding that political debate and social reform merely weaken Germany and play into the hands of her enemies. Finally, with Thomas Mann (in *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*, 1919) 'German politics' becomes an oxymoron, and the German ethos is precariously defined as almost anything but 'political'.

In that strange and moving 'war journal', written during the Great War but published after the cause which Thomas Mann

¹ Men like H. Class (*Wenn ich der Kaiser wär*, 1913), P. de Lagarde (*Die nächsten Pflichten der deutschen Politik*, 1874), J. Langbehn (*Rembrandt als Erzieher*, 1890).

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J. P. Stern

Excerpt

[More information](#)

ANTECEDENTS AND COMPARISONS

9

had 'served with his pen' was lost, many profound things are said on the subject of the artist's isolation and of his ironical commitment to his age. Sartre's observations on the same subject¹ in a situation not wholly dissimilar thirty years later might well have profited from the generosity, the profound wit, the ironical openness of Mann's meditations. It is these qualities above all which give the work its permanent value, its unexpectedly contemporary ring, their absence which renders Sartre's insistence less memorable. But the finer Mann's insights, the more astonishing his omissions. 'Politics' to him is the ideology of the French Revolution, it is parliamentary representation, social amelioration, utilitarianism—'politics' is 'ideology'. The 'political writer' is the French egalitarian, the ideological propagandist. There is little suggestion here that the Reich too is a political organism; that the literary work, *Dichtung* itself, even when it is free from all overt propaganda, exhortation and precept, is (among other things) a political act; that Shakespeare's tragedies are not only explorations of the characters of individual men, of the soul's solitude, but also profound contributions to the political debate of the race; that Schiller's *Wallenstein* succeeds where Goethe's *Egmont* fails. The idea that social and political problems can be solved by an appeal to men's spirituality is only a half-truth. The point of view (e.g. Max Weber's) from which it is clearly seen as a half-truth is never considered seriously; nor ironically either. The 'non-political' attitude, Thomas Mann acknowledges, is conservative; yet the actual political implications of conservatism are never fully drawn. And the social and political dimensions of the novel—the dimensions so splendidly explored in Thomas Mann's own *Buddenbrooks*—are relegated to the inferior genre of the 'social novel' ('*Gesellschaftsroman*') which, in this polemical view, is French and English, and thus merely shallow '*comédie de mœurs*'. True, it is the Great War—the politics of the age—which accounts for the radical nature of Thomas Mann's political conclusions. But, as he himself knows and says, all his conclusions are implicit in the argument and in the literary art of the nineteenth century.

¹ *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* Paris 1948.

Cambridge University Press

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J. P. Stern

Excerpt

[More information](#)

IO

RE-INTERPRETATIONS

Why have the German prose writers of that century not received much attention abroad? Why, on the other hand, have their most notable successors in the first half of the present century been acclaimed abroad as the spokesmen of modern European thought and feeling? The answer to both questions lies in the dissociation of German literature from the political and social realities of its encompassing world. The exploits and spiritual adventures on the margins of one age become the common itinerary of the next. When, in the 1920's, this dissociation ceased to be a peculiarly German phenomenon, it became, for the disaffected West too, the hallmark of authenticity and literary truth.

The situation of nineteenth-century German literature is one in which the literary imagination is but indifferently sustained by the worldly world. Quite often we shall notice, in that situation, a certain lack of feeling for the hard and ineluctable finality of experience—for the deed done that cannot be undone, the word said that cannot be unsaid. Indeed, a whole literary genre, the *Bildungsroman*, is at least partly conceived as an imaginative means for taking the sting of finality out of experience by making experience repeatable. The genre is fundamentally solipsistic. It leads the young hero from self-absorption into society, as though social life were a problematic task rather than a natural condition, the given thing; and his journey, inevitably, is more fascinating than his arrival. But the 'novel of spiritual education' is only one of the characteristic products of a culture which is reluctant to come to terms with its own material and social conditions. Whether experience is presented in the form of an 'educational' experiment or of unalterable fate, all that is of ultimate value in experience is here seen as removed from the socio-political world.

Where self and soul, art and eternity engage the imagination with a force, an abundance of interest, which contemporary society with its political and economic arrangements and the personal implications of its class-structure does not appear to yield; where all the lines and patterns traced by individual wills, historical circumstances and material objects on the social canvas are regarded as somehow sketchy, provisional, as not of the last importance; where solitude is depicted as the natural condition of man; and where the major religious tradition, or what is left