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GRAHAM BARTRAM

The German novel in the long twentieth century

> Most people relate to themselves as storytellers.
> (Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, p. 709)

What kind of scope and limits should a *Companion to the Modern German Novel* set itself? What in particular do we mean by 'modern'?

One approach would equate 'modern' with 'contemporary', and thus focus on the novel in the here-and-now, in 'our era' – whether that era be relatively narrowly defined as the period since the *Wende* (turning-point) of German unification in 1989–90, or more broadly as the six decades following the collapse of Nazi Germany at the end of the Second World War. Both 1945 and 1989 mark important cultural as well as socio-political breaks in the continuum of German history, and there exists a considerable body of scholarly literature devoted to the development of the novel in these periods – as well as in the decades into which they are subdivided.[1] To anchor ourselves purely in the 'now' would however make for a viewpoint that is inherently unstable, as well as lacking a longer-term historical perspective, and a *Companion* constructed around it would fairly soon be overtaken by events.

There are, however, two other understandings of the 'modern', both of which are anchored more firmly in historical time. Both of them are also highly pertinent to the development of the European novel in general, and the German novel in particular.

The first of these definitions refers to the (still ongoing) period of history known as the 'modern age', whose emergence went hand in hand with Europe's gradual transition, between about 1500 and 1800, from a predominantly feudal to a predominantly bourgeois society. This transition encompassed a multiplicity of factors, economic, social and political, among them the emergence of manufacture, the growing competition from the mercantile and subsequently capitalist middle classes to the power of the aristocracy, and the increasing ascendancy of the nation-state over the dynastic ordering of societies. Of primary concern here, however, is its ideological dimension: what might be termed the 'spirit of modernity' was characterised by a series of challenges, ranging from Protestantism to scientific enquiry, to the

dominant and hitherto all-embracing theological worldview of the Catholic Church; and it culminated, in the mid to late eighteenth century, in the Enlightenment's proclamation of the universal values of critical rationality and the freedom of the individual.

Now, if there is any one genre of literature whose development can be linked to this 'modern age', and in particular to the ethos of bourgeois individualism that emerged in the Enlightenment era, it is that of the novel, whose focus on the changing relationship between the individual and the social world equips it to play a vital role in these modernising societies' discourses about themselves and in their imaginings of their futures. The genre has in fact a far longer history: as Margaret Anne Doody has reminded us, European literature (among others) possesses a rich and sprawling tradition of narrative fiction that reaches back to Greek and Roman antiquity, encompassing both 'fantasy' and 'realism' and at times blurring the distinction between the two.[2] It is however in the modern age, and especially the age of Enlightenment, that the novel in its 'realistic' mode becomes one of the primary vehicles for the expression of the new individualism, offering as it does an ideal means of exploring consciousness introspectively, while also depicting the conscious individual in his/her interaction with the surrounding world.[3] The German novel however provides a particular inflection to this interplay between individual and society. As Russell Berman suggests in chapter 6 of this book, the 'novel of (self-)cultivation' (*Bildungsroman*) that came to the fore in Germany in the latter half of the eighteenth century, and which represents that society's major contribution to the classical phase of the European novel,[4] was marked by a distinctive inwardness, a tendency to retreat from real engagement with the social sphere, that partly reflected a recoiling from politics in the aftermath of the French Revolution and the Terror, but was also nurtured by the relative economic and political 'backwardness' of a nation then still divided into innumerable quasi-feudal kingdoms, dukedoms and other territories large and small.[5] This feature of the classical *Bildungsroman*, typified by the conclusion to Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, was in turn given a radical twist in the Romantic variant of the genre, which opened itself up to include elements of fantasy, myth and fairy-tale, but in which (as Ritchie Robertson points out in chapter 4) an intensified inwardness or idealising solipsism held sway: the Romantics' aesthetic vision of a 'poeticisation of reality' all too often meant that the world depicted in the novel became little more than the objectification of the hero's dreams and desires. All in all, however, we can see the widely diverse fiction of the period 1770–1830 as having established a variety of narrative modes, ranging from the realistic to the mythical/fantastical, that were henceforth to be at least potentially available to German novel writers, through the nineteenth

century (in which an increasingly socially oriented *Bildungsroman* became dominant, the Romantic imagination more marginal), and on into the twentieth.[6]

Within the broadly defined modern era whose time-span roughly coincides with the rise of the novel genre, we can however locate a second, more circumscribed notion of the 'modern'; and it is on this latter that the main framework of the present *Companion* is based. The 'modern German novel' is, in a nutshell, the novel since the advent of modern*ism*: a deep-seated and long-term shift in western high culture, which in Germany began – somewhat later than in other European countries such as France – around 1880, which reached its peak (and produced its most monumental works) in the two decades 1913–33, and which over the last thirty years or so has experienced a partly contradictory prolongation under the banner of postmodernism (the subject of Paul Michael Lützeler's concluding chapter 18). Modernism, as Russell Berman shows, was first and foremost a cultural crisis that put in question some of the founding beliefs (in rationality, 'truth', progress and the integrity of the self) that underpin the modern era. (In Germany its key spokesman was the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, whose late nineteenth-century deconstruction of these beliefs has been taken up nearly a century later by the theorists of the postmodern.) But the modernist era also ushered in what the historian Eric Hobsbawm has termed the 'Age of Extremes' – a series of man-made upheavals and catastrophes which, beginning with the First World War of 1914–18, transformed the social and political landscape of Europe (as well as of many other parts of the globe) almost beyond recognition.[7] It hardly needs saying that Germany – key participant in the First World War and effective initiator of the Second; cradle (together with Austria) of Nazism, one of the two totalitarian systems that fought for domination in the mid twentieth century; divided after 1945 between a capitalist West and communist East – was at the centre of these upheavals throughout the 'short twentieth century' that Hobsbawm describes. Our *Companion* therefore sets out to show how the German novel has, over the last one hundred and thirty years, developed a range of strategies, forms and themes, both modernist and otherwise, in its attempt to articulate and come to grips with the profoundly destabilising impact that these 'internal' and 'external' forces have had on modern Europe's traditional understandings of individual and social identity.

The origins of Austrian and German modernist culture lie in the traditionally hierarchical, superficially stable pre-First World War society of the Habsburg and Wilhelmine Empires with their semi-autocratic political systems, within which however were fermenting the social divisions and conflicts described by Lynn Abrams in chapter 2.[8] While admittedly some of

the weightiest modernist novels – Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (chapter 6) or Hermann Broch's *The Sleepwalkers* (chapter 7) for example – were completed in the 1920s or early 1930s, thus in the aftermath of the débâcle of 1914–18, their authors, together with other modernist writers such as Musil and Hofmannsthal, had grown up amidst the apparently still intact social traditions of the prewar era. As a consequence, their cultural and aesthetic values were shaped through and through by a complex tension between fragmentation and wholeness: between the seeming order of pre-1914 institutions and the threat of disintegration lurking underneath, but also between the exposure of that disintegration, and a longing for an ideal harmony and integrity that could be embodied in the structures of the work of art itself. Key to the modernist novel's impact on the society of its day, however, was its gesture of provocation and rupture. As Musil points out through his hero Ulrich, 'most people relate to themselves as storytellers': our own – supposedly non-fictional – narratives of our lives, with deeply ingrained ideas of development through time and goals to be reached (but also maybe tragedies and disappointments), are one of our main defences against the fear that existence may be nothing but disorder and pointlessness. Modernists saw traditional fiction as encouraging its readers to cling on to their comforting but illusory notions of meaning and progression; and in parallel with Ulrich's realisation that his own life has in fact lost that sense of meaningful sequence that 'most people' still have, Musil his creator sets about undermining his readers' complacency by drawing them from the outset into a narrative that breaks radically with the established stylistic and structural conventions of nineteenth-century realism.

Modernism's breaking of nineteenth-century realism's contract between writer and reader took many forms, often involving subject-matter (the articulation of previously taboo aspects of sexuality, for example) as much as structure and style; linking them all was the modernist movement's much broader tendency to identify artistic creation and the realm of the aesthetic as a sphere apart from, and in permanent opposition to, the smugly materialistic values of contemporary bourgeois society. Chapters 3 to 8 of the *Companion* not only show the development of modernist fiction out of the social-realist novel of the late 1880s and 1890s, but also demonstrate something of the remarkable stylistic and thematic diversity of these modernist texts, some of which still tower, alongside James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, like distant peaks over the landscape of twentieth-century European literature. In chapter 3 Alan Bance traces the trajectory from Fontane's *Effi Briest*, with its combination of poetic imagination, carefully balanced ironies and still intact depiction of Wilhelmine

society, via Thomas Mann's foregrounding of aesthetic awareness and social pessimism in *Buddenbrooks*, to the almost despairing social and political satire of Heinrich Mann's *Man of Straw*, in which the threadbare fabric of realism is shot through with elements of caricature and self-critical theatricality. In the first of three chapters in the *Companion* dealing with the themes of sexuality and gender (see also chapters 9 and 17), Ritchie Robertson's investigation of gender anxiety in texts ranging from Musil's *Törless* to Hesse's *Steppenwolf*, Hofmannsthal's *Andreas* and Jahnn's *Perrudja*, focuses on depictions and questionings of masculinity, and highlights Jahnn's novel as a neglected masterpiece of gay literature. Chapter 5 is devoted to Kafka, whose allegorical representations of modernity and the tragi-comic situation of the endlessly self-justifying individual have become one of the defining myths of twentieth-century culture. Together with readings of *The Trial* and *The Castle* (showing in the former case just how wide of the mark Orson Welles's self-indulgently pathos-laden film version was), Stanley Corngold offers an illuminating revaluation of *The Man Who Disappeared* (*America*), an earlier work that paradoxically displays a more postmodern aspect to Kafka's writing than his later modernist ones. In chapter 6, Russell Berman presents Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, with its experiments in time and its ironic, ultimately humanistic critique of warring ideologies, as the simultaneous culmination and subversion of the *Bildungsroman* tradition; while chapter 7 examines the equally, if not more ambitious attempts by the Austrians Hermann Broch (*The Sleepwalkers*) and Robert Musil (*The Man Without Qualities*) to forge the novel into an aesthetic-cum-intellectual entity capable of taking the measure of, and itself measuring up to, the cultural crisis of the age. Finally, in the last of the *Companion*'s chapters devoted largely to modernism, Burton Pike's wide-ranging survey of the image of the city shows how, in such early twentieth-century works as Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* and (later) Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, the urban setting exchanges the specificity and concrete detail of the nineteenth-century text for an increasing abstraction that makes it the vehicle for a wide range of symbolic and metaphorical significances.

In 1936, a few years after the appearance of the first part of *The Man Without Qualities*, in which the modernist consciousness shared by author and protagonist had subverted narrative conventions so to speak 'from within', an essay entitled 'The Storyteller' by the German-Jewish philosopher and intellectual Walter Benjamin registered the crippling impact that the *external* events of the previous twenty years had had on people's ability to narrate their lives:

> Experience has fallen in value. . . . With the World War a process began to become apparent which has not halted since then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent – not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? . . . Never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn carriage now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a force-field of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.[9]

War, the collapse of the Kaiserreich and the 1923 inflation crisis between them swept away the old, confining yet reassuring social order that had given birth to modernism, and, in so doing, ushered in the final phase of the 'classical' modernist novel. Alongside the great retrospective works of Mann, Broch and Musil, modernism's aesthetic challenge to bourgeois society mutated in the 1920s into the politicised literature of the left-wing avant-garde (in particular the theatre of Bertolt Brecht); its stylistic innovations, though henceforth available to writers who wished to make use of them, inevitably lost the 'shock of the new'. If anything, it was the Nazi and Stalinist dictatorships, with their forcible reimposition (in right-wing and left-wing variants) of a conservatively 'German' or (socialist) 'realist' aesthetic, that helped to give a kind of afterlife to what they burned and banished as (respectively) 'decadent' or 'formalist'; in the second half of the twentieth century, it was to be the culturally conservative society of post-Nazi Austria that produced the confrontational modernism of a Thomas Bernhard or an Elfriede Jelinek, and the German Democratic Republic's state-imposed orthodoxy of 'socialist realism' that helped in part to provoke the exuberant modernist-cum-postmodernist imagination of an Irmtraud Morgner (see the discussion by Patricia Herminghouse in chapter 15 and Allyson Fiddler in chapter 17).

Meanwhile, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, there emerged a new generation of younger writers whose values and attitudes had been predominantly formed not by the prewar conventions of Wilhelmine society but by the Weimar Republic's much more open social and cultural conflict between tradition and modernity. Strikingly 'modern' – to a reader in the early twenty-first century – are the women writers Vicki Baum, Gabriele Tergit, Irmgard Keun and Marieluise Fleißer, who came to the fore against the background of the partial, and highly controversial, emancipation of women in the 1920s, and who are discussed by Elizabeth Boa in chapter 9. While variously appropriating modernist techniques (for example, the late modernist principle of montage also used by Alfred Döblin in his *Berlin Alexanderplatz*)

to embody the fragmentation and cultural diversity of 1920s society and to puncture the nevertheless still potent ideologies of social 'wholeness', they combine these techniques with elements of naturalism and realism in the construction of distinctively feminine, sometimes feminist perspectives that seem to have little to do with the overwhelmingly male-dominated enterprise of modernism, and, if anything, look forward to a later, postmodernist aesthetic. Scarcely had these modern feminine voices made themselves heard, however, than they were repressed or exiled by the Nazi dictatorship with its vehemently anti-feminist ideology; and although authors such as Anna Seghers and Irmgard Keun made important contributions to literary resistance to the Third Reich (see Ronald Speirs's discussion in chapter 11), it was not until the 'second wave' women's movement of the 1970s and 1980s that women writers, some of whom played an active part in the rediscovery of their 1920s predecessors, were to re-emerge with a distinctive, and this time much more highly politicised voice.

Even when not explicitly 'political' in its intentions, the 1920s women's writing discussed in chapter 9 inevitably took on a political charge in the polarised force-field of the tradition-versus-modernity conflicts of the 1920s. The same was equally, if not even more the case with the war novels presented by Michael Minden in chapter 10, their stances ranging from the traditional idealising patriotism of Walter Flex to the subtly nuanced humanism of Arnold Zweig, from the brutally modern nationalism of Ernst Jünger to the equally modern indictment of war in Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*. What is also clear, in a way that seems partly to belie Walter Benjamin's statement on the numbed 'silence' of the soldiers returning from the unprecedented horrors of trench warfare, is that a writer like Remarque was indeed able, albeit from a distance of over ten years, to articulate persuasively the reality of what he, and hundreds of thousands of others, had been through. A bestseller that effectively bridged the gulf between 'high' and popular culture, and, as Michael Minden shows, abandoned many of the structural conventions of traditional narrative in order to be adequate to what it was depicting, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, with its overriding claim to 'authenticity', signals what was to become one of the most important – but also most problematic – roles of the German novel in the turbulent twentieth century: that of what has been termed 'witness literature',[10] conveying to contemporaries and documenting for posterity a reality that is sometimes hard or even unbearable to imagine.

A similar claim of 'authenticity' could also be made for the novels of the 'little man' discussed by Anthony Waine in chapter 14. Beginning with Hans Fallada's bestseller of the 1929–33 Depression, *Little Man – What Now?*, and resuming after the Second World War with the novels of Heinrich Böll and,

later, Martin Walser, this subgenre documents with imaginative empathy and often naturalistic detail the lives of ordinary people who, like Remarque's soldiers, albeit in a less extreme situation, see themselves largely as the passive objects of social forces they have no hope of controlling. (We are here indeed a long way from the 'educational' aspirations of the *Bildungsroman*, even in its modernistically self-ironising form.) Fallada's hero Johannes Pinneberg is representative of man in modern mass society, and his fate had its real-life parallels in many countries of the industrialised world in the early 1930s; at the same time, as Ralf Dahrendorf has pointed out, Fallada's deeply sympathetic portrayal of his protagonist's feelings of frustration and powerlessness provides us with a telling insight into the mentality of the masses of ordinary Germans who were about to succumb to the threats and blandishments of the National Socialists.[11]

Literature as direct and truthful witness to contemporary events could not be published within the Third Reich. As Ronald Speirs's chapter 11 shows, however, fiction written during the twelve years of the Hitler regime – in many cases by writers in exile – deployed a wide range of different forms and styles, from the 'exemplary' historical novels of Heinrich Mann to the 'eye-witness' account of Nazi Germany in Irmgard Keun's *After Midnight*, in implicit or explicit opposition to the dictatorship. *Youth without God*, by the Austrian (or more properly Austro-Hungarian) Ödön von Horváth, shows us, through the morally 'unreliable' voice of its first-person narrator, the insidiously corrupting pressure of totalitarianism on the uncommitted though well-meaning individual; Anna Seghers's *The Seventh Cross* is perhaps the most celebrated example of the politically committed resistance novel, whose humanist values are combined with a multi-perspectival (and thus intrinsically anti-totalitarian) structure in an open attack on the supposed omnipotence of the Nazi terror apparatus. At the same time, the omnipresent censorship within Germany and later Austria meant that in some cases, allegorical or quasi-mythical novels that *were* allowed by the Nazis (Bergengruen's *A Matter of Conscience*, Ernst Jünger's *On the Marble Cliffs*) were mistakenly endowed by the readers with a 'coded' anti-Hitler message that the author had not in fact intended.

In the years and decades following the 1945 defeat of Germany (including annexed Austria) and the collapse of the Nazi regime, the ways in which German-speaking novelists went about making sense of reality were marked, perhaps more starkly than they had ever been, by the divergent world-political fates of the different German-speaking states: Austria; German-speaking Switzerland (an ethnic entity within the Swiss confederation); and Germany itself, divided from 1945 until 1990 into a Soviet-dominated socialist state in the East, and a pluralist–capitalist West. Austria and Switzerland

had long nourished distinctive national-cultural identities that in Austria's case had become more pronounced following the unification of Germany, excluding Austria, under Prussian dominance in 1871: in literature, this positioning outside the powerhouse of Germany but within the multilingual Habsburg Empire had engendered *inter alia* a peculiarly Austrian emphasis on the theme of *language*, its inadequacies but also its creative potential, that became particularly prominent in the modernist era (e.g. Hofmannsthal's *Ein Brief*), and was to be resumed by writers such as Peter Handke in the second half of the twentieth century. In the aftermath of 1945, however, the policies of the victorious Allies, acting now as occupying powers, further accentuated pre-existing national-cultural differences. On the one hand, the western half of divided Germany was made to confront, and feel responsible for, the crimes of the Nazi era, so that the task of *Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit* or *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* ('coming to terms with the past') became, as Dagmar Barnouw shows in chapter 12, an overwhelming though virtually unfulfillable imperative. (The socialist GDR meanwhile neatly dissociated itself from Nazism as a product of capitalism in crisis.) Austria on the other hand was allowed to retain its unity as a nation-state and to consider itself the 1938 victim of Nazi aggression; hence the post-1945 survival there of a relatively intact and fairly complacent 'conservative' culture. Neutral Switzerland, finally, remained apparently morally and politically unscathed by whatever accommodations it had had to make with Nazi Germany during the war years. It was thus no coincidence that while in the 1950s West German novelists such as Heinrich Böll were struggling to find language and narrative structures adequate to convey the chaotic, sometimes blackly comic, horror of their war experiences (e.g. Böll's *And Where Were You, Adam?*), it was the Swiss author Max Frisch who with his 1954 novel *Stiller* began to explore the existential conflicts of personal identity that, as Michael Butler points out in chapter 16, only found more general entry into German literature with the 'New Subjectivity' of the 1970s.

The GDR, unlike the preceding Hitler regime, possessed novelists such as Anna Seghers who were not only endowed with considerable creative powers but who, as communists or left-wing socialists, were in basic sympathy with the Marxist (if not the Leninist) principles of the Soviet-backed Socialist Unity Party (SED), and who had in many cases made a conscious choice to settle in the GDR rather than in the FRG after their years of exile. Writers were seen by the Party as essential ideological allies in the creation of a new, socialist consciousness, and were in many cases generously subsidised; in exchange, however, published works, subject to a multilayered process of censorship that all too easily became self-censorship, had to conform to the Stalinist literary orthodoxy of 'socialist realism', originally enunciated by

Zhdanov in 1934. This prescribed formulaic and all-too-predictable structures for the novel, often involving a (usually proletarian) hero or heroine encountering superable obstacles on the road to a socialist goal: a kind of banalised *Bildungsroman*, in fact. Chapter 15 shows how a new generation of writers coming to prominence after the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961 – in particular Christa Wolf with *Divided Heaven* – began a process of chipping away at this deadening orthodoxy, introducing subject-matter and narrative structures that created spaces for individual rather than socialised subjectivity – Wolf's 'subjective authenticity' – and increasingly for penetrating critiques of GDR society. In her study of works by Wolf, Irmtraud Morgner, Volker Braun, Christoph Hein and Stefan Heym, Patricia Herminghouse shows how the GDR's 'critical Marxists', engaged to the end with their state's professed goals and its manifest shortcomings, turned the novel into a vital 'public space' in which between the lines, but also increasingly openly (cf. Braun's mockery of the censors), social issues received an airing that they were denied elsewhere in the state-controlled media.

In the GDR the link between the novel and politics was (for the writer) an unavoidable given; in the other German-speaking countries, particularly West Germany, the 1960s witnessed a politicisation of culture that culminated in the neo-avantgardiste proclamation of the 'death of literature' in the midst of the student movement of 1967–9, followed (according to a not altogether implausible literary-historical narrative) by a pendulum-swing into the 'New Subjectivity', with its focus on the private and the personal, in the 1970s and early 1980s. Three of the chapters covering these decades – J. H. Reid's discussion of literature and commitment in novels by Böll, Grass and Weiss, Michael Butler's investigation of the 'rediscovery of the self' in Frisch and Handke, and Allyson Fiddler's study of women's writing in the 1970s and 1980s – make clear however that any periodisation based on a straightforward opposition between the 'personal' and the 'political', and between politics and aesthetics, is bound to be a crass oversimplification. Political interventions by novelists can in fact take one of two different, though interrelated, forms. On the one hand, a prominent writer may exploit his/her public reputation as an intellectual figurehead by contributing directly to political debate and taking an active part in party-political campaigning – as Thomas Mann did in the 1920s, and as Günter Grass has done from the late 1960s onwards. This extra-literary political activity is however quite distinct from the novelist's other opportunity for intervention: the much more subtle and wide-ranging means that the novel itself has at its disposal to affect its readers' consciousness and their political awareness. Firstly, the novel in its social-realist mode can show and bring to life dimensions of a society's experience, past and present, that its readers had hitherto ignored