Chapter I

GENERAL SURVEY
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I imagine the world of men as a race of children marooned on an island of hard facts, most of them with their backs to the sea busily digging or building in the sand. They squabble a good deal; they achieve considerably less, and the little they accomplish is often wholly or partly obliterated by the waves, so that they have to move their pitch and begin all over again. The more adventurous gather by the water’s edge, where they paddle or wade or even try to swim. The most ingenious make primitive crafts to which the bravest of all entrust themselves, struggling back to land if they can when the boats ship water or capsize. From this scene of activity and endeavour some few hold themselves aloof, motionlessly staring out over the ocean as if absorbed by its wonder, mystery and menace. Taken as a whole they are less prepossessing than the others; something brooding in their looks and strained in their posture seems to indicate that they are less fit for life on the island than those around them; but as long as they are occupied with their dreams they will remain unnoticed.

In Modern Europe the German race once presented much the same spectacle as those hypothetical children, taking the island as a symbol for the world, and the ocean for an unknown absolute power. For the Germans cherish a hopeless passion for the absolute, under whatever name and in whatever guise they imagine it. The Russians have had stranger visions; the French have shown themselves more capable of embodying abstract ideas in political institutions; but the Germans are unique perhaps in the ardour with which they pursue ideas and attempt to transform them into realities. Their great achievements, their catastrophic failures, their tragic political history are all impregnated with this dangerous idealism. If most of us are the victims of circumstances, it may truly be
said of the Germans as a whole that they are at the mercy of ideas.

This strange defencelessness has set its seal on their literature with its prolonged periods of slavish imitation of foreign countries, its unbalanced enthusiasms, its helpless subjection to catchwords, fashions and aesthetic theories; but it is also responsible for highly original, beautiful, sphinx-like monuments, deeply philosophical in content. The general run of poets create their own visions of life; the Germans on the other hand have sought inspiration from philosophers. Goethe’s genius was nourished by Spinoza; Schiller wrestled with Kant; the romantic poets steeped themselves in Fichte and Schelling; Hegel ruled the Young Germans; Wagner and Nietzsche were the children of Schopenhauer. Wherever we look we find German poets standing on the shoulders of philosophers in order to view the world; seeking for absolute beauty in the realm of absolute truth.

This was the fundamental reason why the Renaissance took the form of a religious reformation in Germany which was hardly touched by the rebirth of beauty in poetry, art and life in the rest of Europe. Truth was far more important than beauty to the deeply brooding mind of Luther, who typified the spirit of his race. The Greeks and Romans could not teach a man how to save his soul. And neither, alas, could the Catholic Church. It was owing to this discovery, as it was generally accepted to be, that philosophy gradually usurped the inspirational function religion had hitherto performed for the poets. By depriving the Germans of Roman Catholicism, Luther took from them a system which had nourished their mysticism and ministered to their sense of beauty whilst commanding their belief. In a word he destroyed the mythological element of Christianity, that poetical combination of beauty and truth for which they have ever since been seeking in Greek or Nordic mythologies or by reverting to the Catholic faith. Science and philosophy have profited incalculably by Luther’s outstanding achievement, freedom of thought; the German poets have suffered for that act of liberation. Whether sceptics or not (and most of the great German poets have been sceptics),
they found the Christianity he bequeathed to them barren of beauty and also lacking in that mystical profundity which philosophy supplied instead.

The immediate result of the Reformation in poetry was the decline of the popular tradition with its sturdy national characteristics; for it was still in its infancy, and not nearly strong enough to survive such a spiritual upheaval and the ensuing devastation of the Thirty Years’ War. Foreign influences rushed into Germany and swamped it; in particular baroque elements, grotesquely exaggerated, nearly choked the life out of poetry. During the seventeenth century a few mystics wrote some strangely beautiful religious verse; one purely lyric poet lived and sinned and suffered and sang; a great realist wrote a great prose novel; a tragic dramatist created powerful, exotic, feverish, questioning plays, dominated by the torturing conception of the dualism between the flesh and the soul, between death and life which was the great spiritual preoccupation of the age. Weird grimaces, quavering reedy voices pointed the same moral. But otherwise incredible emotional aridity, highly-flavoured eroticism, ingenuity, virtuosity, over-laden forms, dry-as-dust content, stone-cold verse, grotesque prose, mountainous knowledge, mouse-like wisdom characterised the literary labours of seventeenth-century Germany.

In the early years of the eighteenth century the pendulum swung backwards towards reason and taste as expounded by Gottsched and practised by the French; it began to oscillate again however when the Swiss Gemelli Bodmer and Breitinger uplifted a clamorous plea for imagination and the miraculous in poetry. That a great rebirth of German literature was at hand seemed clear from the publication of the first three cantos of Klopstock’s *Messias* in 1748 with its flood of emotion and music breaking through at last into the arid wilderness of rococo verse. What form this rebirth would have taken one can deduce roughly from Goethe’s Storm and Stress period. But one would need to be a German oneself to realise the nature of the inspiration emanating from Winckelmann’s miraculous discovery of an absolute standard of beauty for his country-
men, the so-called Greek perfection which has haunted the dreams of German poets from that day to this.

If I were constrained to write a history of German literature from 1700 onwards, I could only do so from this angle; for it seems to me that Winckelmann’s Greece was the essential factor in the development of German poetry throughout the latter half of the eighteenth and the whole of the nineteenth century. It was the Renaissance all over again, but this time in a country which takes such movements differently from the rest of Europe. If the Greeks are tyrants, the Germans are predestined slaves. Greece has profoundly modified the whole trend of modern civilisation, imposing her thought, her standards, her literary forms, her imagery, her visions and dreams wherever she is known. But Germany is the supreme example of her triumphant spiritual tyranny. The Germans have imitated the Greeks more slavishly; they have been obsessed by them more utterly, and they have assimilated them less than any other race. The extent of the Greek influence is incalculable throughout Europe; its intensity is at its highest in Germany.

There is another side to the picture. Tyranny of any sort always engenders rebellion; and a sturdy resistance to the alien beauty of Greek poetry has also left its mark on European literature. The Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes had repercussions in many countries. Shakespeare’s hatred of Homer’s heroes, so defiantly manifested in Troilus and Cressida, was a spirited answer to the spiritual challenge inherent in the devastating glory of the Greeks. But the Germans outdid the rest of Europe in the violence of their rebellion. The romantic poets and the naturalistic writers went to the utmost extremes to free themselves from the Greeks, only to see the enemy return in power and vigour as they fell into decay. And if such poets as Milton and Racine have been too deeply influenced by the Greeks for mere analysis to reveal, the Germans are unique in having suffered an impact so terrific that it took the form of fate.

It is from this point of view that the present monograph is written, leaving large tracts of a vast subject untouched. The
question of sources is hardly glanced at. To give a concrete example: the debt Goethe's *Iphigenia* owed to French versions of Euripides' drama is not examined. The possession or otherwise of accurate knowledge about the Greeks is a point which is rarely raised, although the fact that Winckelmann and his followers on the whole misinterpreted the nature of Greek poetry and art is occasionally stressed. But accurate knowledge has little inspirational value; ideals, however unreal, exercise a dynamic power, especially over German minds, and it is this power that I have tried to gauge. Nor am I concerned with that aspect of the works of the poets who figure in this book which would attract a Hellenist: their success or failure to approximate to Greek standards. It is not what they made of the Greeks which interests me, but what the Greeks made of them. For I am not writing a history of the German classical movement. I am ignoring not only works of criticism, translation and scholarship, but also a wealth of poetry and a multitude of classical themes which would naturally be included in such a history. But the extent and the development of the Greek influence in German literature is not my subject; therefore Wieland, the Schlegels, Grillparzer and Platen receive only casual mention; and the well-known quarrel Goethe picked with Wieland's *Alcestis* in *Gods, Heroes and Wieland* has been passed over in silence. I am attempting to measure the intensity and the nature of the tyranny of the Greeks over some great outstanding minds. The criterion for inclusion has in nearly every instance turned on the question of personal fate. Lessing, Herder and Spitteler, who suffered no fate at the hands of the Greeks, have been introduced for the sake of the particular twist they gave to a potent ideal which altered the spiritual lives of others. Had space permitted, I should have dealt more fully with Nietzsche; but (and this is perhaps the most controversial of my findings) I have come to the conclusion that it was Heine and not Nietzsche who gave the *coup de grâce* to Winckelmann's Greece; and that Nietzsche was the first victim to a new ideal introduced by Heine. His place is therefore outside the main portion of this book. Finally, since I am concentrating almost entirely on one
aspect of lives and minds which had innumerable other facets, a certain stylisation has been inevitable; and the whole, in reality an extremely complex subject, appears in simplified outlines. I can claim only to shed some light on the German temperament or at least to have tried to do so. And if this book seems sensational, the subject and not the writer must be blamed. The Germans create sensations because they ignore obstacles and appear unaware of danger where ideas or ideals are involved.

Those solitary children on the imaginary island drew together at last and rose in a body to play with the others. They dug deeper, but built less securely; they swam faster but not so far; they made larger boats which capsized sooner; they grew angry and created confusion and uproar; they either could not or would not assimilate the rules of the various games. And yet they knew something the others did not, something about the nature of the sea.
Chapter II

THE DISCOVERER

WINCKELMANN

1717–1768

1. A Latter-day Greek
2. Rome
3. Eros
4. Destiny
5. The Myth of Laocoon

In the fantastic plans of foreign travel continually passing through his mind...there seems always to be rather a wistful sense of something lost to be regained, than the desire of discovering anything new.

WALTER PATER

The Renaissance