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0521024404 - The Dear Purchase: A Theme in German Modernism

J. P. Stern

Excerpt

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Introduction

German literature in the first half of this century has a value and an interest which can now be taken for granted. There is, I think, a fairly general agreement that some of its greatest writers are Rainer Maria Rilke, Thomas Mann, Franz Kafka and Bertolt Brecht; and also Gottfried Benn, Stefan George, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Robert Musil and Georg Trakl; and finally (in an order of decreasing agreement) Ernst Jünger, Karl Kraus and Hermann Hesse. The achievement of each of these authors is individual and unique, each of them has received and continues to receive the attention of readers and critics throughout the Western world, and the fame of the most renowned – Rilke, Mann, Kafka – transcended the ideological divide.

These writers did not form a school, they overlap in time but do not belong to the same generation; the oldest of them, Stefan George, was born in 1868, the youngest, Ernst Jünger, is still alive, at ninety-eight, as this goes to press. They are German by virtue of their language. For the rest, their allegiance to the six states in which they lived – Wilhelmine Germany, Austria-Hungary, Weimar Germany, the First Austrian Republic, the Third Reich and Federal Germany – is almost always problematic; but so is their attitude to the language they share. What they have in common, first and foremost, is simply the distinction of their achievement: they have staked out areas – very different areas in territory hitherto uncharted – on the margins of experience; here lies the interest and overall value these authors have for us. Yet if their importance can be taken for granted, the individual values which inform and are

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

conveyed in their writings are certainly open to critical scrutiny, now more than ever before. Some of these values and concerns – attitudes to the world and to man's lot in it – they all share; in other respects they are hardly on speaking terms with each other – in short, they form a family of sorts. The book confines itself to presenting their individual achievements to the extent that they contribute to *a literature* and through it give articulate expression to the temper of an age – the deeply unfriendly age whose witnesses and representatives they were. This is the agenda of the present study. An indication of how it came to be written may help to suggest with what expectations it should be read.

A good many years ago, in the autumn of 1957, I received an invitation from the secretary of the Oliver Pryor Society of Cambridge – an annual conference of schoolmasters and dons devoted to the study of modern languages – to give them ‘a paper on some general topic connected with modern, twentieth-century German literature’ – a subject which was then not on the syllabus of most British universities. My instructions were specific: the paper should not be confined to a single author and it should be of interest to non-specialists, yet – an anxious postscript was added – ‘it should not be too general either’. Delivered before the Society on New Year's Eve of that year under the title ‘The Dear Purchase’, the poor ghost of that paper has haunted me in everything I have written on twentieth-century topics ever since.

What this invitation prompted was the hazy notion of a history of German and Austrian literature during the first half of this century. Nietzsche had taught me that the criteria of what to include in any ‘history’ were bound to be steeped in value judgements, though I did not believe (as Nietzsche impatiently concluded) that this was bound to render those criteria private and subjectively biased. I came to see my task then, as I see it now, as the study of a series of *major* literary works, related to the general history of the period and connected with each other through their family likeness. In other words: the book of which that early essay was a sort of prospectus is

Cambridge University Press

0521024404 - The Dear Purchase: A Theme in German Modernism

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

intended to be a series of connected descriptions of what it means for a given group of literary works to be datable as modern.

Literary history as I knew it then and as it still continues to be written today seems to me discredited. To the extent that it is conceived as a comprehensive account of as many major and minor works of an era as will find space between the covers of a book, the enterprise strikes me as having very little to do with the study and even less with the enjoyment of literary works; the necessary condition of which I take to be close and patient attention to individual texts as sources of insight and knowledge – as sources of pleasure through insight and knowledge. And if to write the history – *any* history – of an age is to make coherent sense of a segment of the past, then conventional literary histories are properly speaking not histories at all, but lists of authors, -isms, themes and schools chronologically arranged.

Yet the relationship between literature and history is not to be disposed of by deploring the scant insights provided by literary histories of the kind I have mentioned. The old view which claimed that by giving a work of art its historical coordinates we somehow invalidate it and render it ephemeral, seems to me no less odd than the more recent view which looks on the placing of literary works in their time as an eccentric or irrelevant option. The immortality of the great works of literature is in no way diminished by determining their time and place; in an important sense they are as ‘timeless’ as the human condition of which they are the repository and the source. The genesis of such works (involving questions of biography and historical studies) is different from their substance (involving more narrowly literary studies), and different works will require a different emphasis to be given to each of these enquiries; but neither can be wholly irrelevant to the critic’s task. There is no significant disjunction, no ‘either or’, between the study of ‘the language’ of a work and ‘the history’ of which it is a part. To study the literature of another age involves some of the same problems as does the study of the literature of another country; to ignore the fact that language is, among other things, an historical phenomenon, and thus subject to change, leads to

Cambridge University Press

0521024404 - The Dear Purchase: A Theme in German Modernism

J. P. Stern

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4

The dear purchase

much the same inadequate understanding of a text as does ignorance of the vocabulary of a foreign language. Take the word 'Erlebnis': its twentieth-century connotations are in several ways different from those of 'experience', its nearest English equivalent. But they are also different from the connotations the word had for Goethe when he speaks of 'Erlebnisse' as exciting military adventures. What makes for the difference is that at certain points in the literature (and subsequently in the common parlance) of the age with which we are here concerned, a special value came to be given to certain highly charged inward 'experiences' at the extremes of ordinary human experience, and this value came to be connoted in the 'modern' uses of the word. 'Mein Fronterlebnis' is about the only asset the young Hitler can appeal to when he begins his political career; a little later, in 1921, Robert Musil notes in an essay-fragment:

was man anfangs stammelte und später zur Phrase entarten ließ, daß der Krieg ein seltsames, dem religiösen verwandtes Erlebnis gewesen sei, kennzeichnet unzweifelhaft eine Tatsache ...¹

Those words we stammered when it first began, which later degenerated into a cliché, that the War was a strange experience resembling religious experience, undoubtedly describe a fact ...

– not, however, in the sense of an ordeal sent by God, but as a 'religious' value in and by itself.

The historicity of the literature I was interested in – the presence of history in the works and of the works in history – seems to me undeniable. The very fact that, however sceptical I might be of 'the general view', I could not help seeing works written over half a century as 'a literature', suggested a coherence of the kind that a literary history should provide. For one thing I became aware that there was something apparently radically new about the most distinguished books of the era that followed the death of Theodor Fontane in 1898; for another, I found that these books contained a variety of themes of European interest, and connections linking them with European ideas, such as were hardly to be found in German

Cambridge University Press

0521024404 - The Dear Purchase: A Theme in German Modernism

J. P. Stern

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

literature in the decades following the death of Goethe in 1832; and finally, in Erich Heller's *The Disinherited Mind* of 1952 I was fortunate to have a pattern and an inspiration for my undertaking. My indebtedness to Heller's work, which I see not only as an inspiring critical study but also in some ways as a part of the literature that is its subject, will be patent in many arguments of this book.

Academic minds work in circuitous ways. Instead of coming straight to the point and writing the book I then envisaged, I found looming up before me three preliminary tasks: first, to discover some nineteenth-century antecedents for the literature whose shape was forming in my mind; secondly, to show something of the politics of the age in its relationship to – its strange affinities with – that literature; and thirdly, to give an account of the philosophical background and heritage from which the literary masterpieces took some of their strength and many of their limitations; here again, Heller's pioneering essays on the Nietzschean influence pointed the way. These three topics were intended as chapters of the present book; in the event, each turned out to require a study of its own.

As to the nineteenth-century antecedents, a natural opening and transition offered itself. In 1912, at the period which constitutes the climax and end of the Wilhelmine era, Rainer Maria Rilke had begun writing the *Duino Elegies*, a cycle whose central importance was recognised almost immediately on its completion ten years later. The Elegies (that much was clear even in the late twenties, after Rilke's death in January 1926) were an intensely philosophical and programmatic work – Rilke himself had spoken of them as 'a project of Being', 'ein Daseinsentwurf' – yet, because that illusory notion of 'timelessness' came between them and their readers, the historical perspective of the poems was less readily acknowledged. The poetic persona round which they are built – we may call it 'the historical we' – is never in doubt: from the poignant opening of the First Elegy onward it is the condition of modern, twentieth-century man that is invoked, challenged, lamented, and validated. But the lines that follow provide a connection, too, with the immediate past, with that century into which Rilke

Cambridge University Press

0521024404 - The Dear Purchase: A Theme in German Modernism

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

6

The dear purchase

and most of our authors were born and in which some of them remained rooted. For these lines –

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

Alas, who is there
we are able to make use of? Not angels, not men;
and even the canny animals are aware
that we are not very securely at home
in our interpreted world

– sum up, with an unparalleled richness of implication, the spirit of those nineteenth-century antecedents which I wished to evoke; and *Re-interpretations* (1964), the book in which I tried to do this, took its title from these lines and from the human condition named in them. This is the insight on which Rilke eventually based a whole landscape of images in the *Elegies*, and which I took up and applied to the age that preceded them: that ‘we are not very securely at home / in our interpreted world’ because we do not live ‘where it is real’, because (as T. S. Eliot, his contemporary, put it) ‘human kind cannot bear very much reality’. No lines of modern poetry are more familiar than Eliot’s, or than Rilke’s ‘gleich dahinter ist *wirklich*’, in the Tenth Elegy (‘just behind there, it’s *real*’), yet that notion of ‘reality’, which is with us still, proved even more enigmatic than either of them suggested. Here above all the need to provide an historical elucidation was paramount.

The wartime generation to which I belong did not find the reading of German literature easy. Given that Hitler’s Third Reich was the central event of German history in our time, we were bound to ask what did and what did not belong to that event. A few of our teachers presented the unedifying spectacle of scholars engaged in the study of a subject they loathed. Others encouraged us to proceed on the premise that the masterpieces of the modern era were written in a spirit wholly disconnected from the mainstream of German history, or

Cambridge University Press

0521024404 - The Dear Purchase: A Theme in German Modernism

J. P. Stern

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

uncompromisingly opposed to it. After all (so the argument went) there were the 'good' Germans, chief among them Thomas Mann as well as his political and personal adversary Bertolt Brecht, who had actively and at times heroically opposed the government and ideology of their own country; and had not Count Stauffenberg, the colonel who made the attempt on Hitler's life on 20 July 1944, been one of Stefan George's disciples? In this spirit the first version of my paper was written. What it contained was a wholly positive statement of my theme, largely free from political considerations. The way the paper was received did not at first suggest to me that I should take a more critical view of my subject. But in 1964 I went to Berkeley and there, in the atmosphere of politicisation – at once indiscriminate and stimulating – which pervaded the place, I began to have second thoughts. My original premise, that the politics of the era could be wholly separated from its literature, became increasingly questionable; not, I thought, as a matter of principle (which fails to ask whether, and when, connections between literature and politics are worth establishing), but in this particular case.

The personal heroism of those who opposed the regime remained undisputed – so, too, did the terrible practices of the regime and its henchmen (some of the worst of them recruited from among the dregs of Central and Eastern Europe), the craven conduct and silent connivance of the overwhelming majority of the German (let alone Austrian) population, their contrived ignorance of the sheer numbers of the victims and of their total, forsaken helplessness. The moral divisions, too, remained fairly clear – clearer, at all events, than the ideological ones. I had been a pupil of Michael Oakeshott, who taught me to see history as a field of study – 'a mode of experience' – in which continuities and coherences were to be sought. Was 1933 really such a break with the past as practically every German historian of the postwar era suggested? And if not, was one committed to those dreary arguments from 'historical inevitability', to 'the straight line of German history from Herder and Hamann to Hitler' – arguments which, even in wartime, had seemed uncomfortably close to the ideology for whose

Cambridge University Press

0521024404 - The Dear Purchase: A Theme in German Modernism

J. P. Stern

Excerpt

[More information](#)

defeat they were summoned? Was it really plausible to maintain that, in the case that interested me, there was no connection between the historical and the literary, to argue for a literary history (however rudimentary) without a history?

Of course, it was hardly an overstatement to say that the thirties and forties had indeed been an extraordinary era in German history, and it seemed more like five centuries than five decades since a German historian had claimed that every epoch stands in a special relationship to God; the Devil seemed the more likely patron. Still, how exceptional *was* that era? From the reconstruction by means of which I hoped to answer this question, certain continuities emerged; they did not diminish the extraordinariness of the age (no reputable enquiry could do that), but they did resolve the paradox. It appeared, after all, that the age had, not a single voice, yet a recognisable and distinct tonality of its own that could be heard, a variety of styles with common affinities that could be read in the space encompassed by politics, society and literature.

That a study of the politics of the age would have to centre on Hitler seemed obvious (to everybody, that is, except the Marxists who, in spite of Stalin, continued to regard all concern with leadership and the will to power as capitalist evasions). What interested me in writing *Hitler: The Führer and the People* (1975) was not the dictator's biography, which even by that time had been so exhaustively documented that it offered no promise of new insights. Instead, I set out to answer some of the questions that had not been asked: how representative was he of the society into which he launched himself in Munich in 1918; what were the ideas and values to which he appealed, and the rhetoric on which he relied; and what, if anything, had these values and ideas in common with the preceding era of German history and with the rest of Europe? I did not write a book about 'Hitler's language' (as some of the critics said) for the simple reason that I did not believe he had a language of his own, in any except a disreputably metaphorical sense – the sense, precisely, I was intent on refuting. What seemed more promising was to take his rhetoric seriously – as seriously as his followers and the German and Austrian public generally had

Cambridge University Press

0521024404 - The Dear Purchase: A Theme in German Modernism

J. P. Stern

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

done. Only in that way did it become possible to understand them and the appeal he had for them, and to understand the society to which the writers on my list, too, had once belonged. To focus on the rhetoric inevitably gave it the weightiness that attaches to any object of concerted enquiry. There is no valid criticism, literary or historical, that can proceed without taking its object seriously.

The insights I gained, then, as far as they are relevant to this introduction, were not at all startling: first, that Hitler did not fall upon a quiescent or innocent Germany (or Austria) as the *conquistadores* fell upon Peru; secondly, that Germany, before the thirties at all events, was not an island but an inseparable part of the European main; thirdly, that a total separation between the political and the literary spheres may just be possible in the case of an individual isolated writer (such as Georg Trakl), but that it made no sense where a number of writers with tangible affinities were concerned, least of all in an age that saw itself – as we see it still – as an age dominated by ideologies; and finally, that if a connection did emerge between the political and the literary manifestations of that society, then all that made that connection possible was bound to be of importance not only for Germany, but for other parts of the West also. Here was ‘the line that led straight back to Herder’: to establish the similarities and preserve the differences between a multitude of literary, cultural and political phenomena was the task Herder had so enthusiastically set himself, and which since his time has been regarded as a respectable use of the critical faculty. I had a further reason for such an undertaking. What I hoped to gain, as I have said, was a clearer view of the past: such a view justifies nothing, assuages nothing, heals no wounds; but it is the only valid homage we are able to pay to the victims.

All effective propaganda, and the rhetoric it employs, are based on some preliminary consensus of values. Hitler’s rhetoric, and that of his henchmen, followed the pattern of his ‘Either/Or, Victory or Death’ ideology, and that ideology (I perceived) had strong religious connotations. The point at issue is not whether he believed in it, but that he had the talent to fictionalise it, and himself, in a representative role. And,

Cambridge University Press

0521024404 - The Dear Purchase: A Theme in German Modernism

J. P. Stern

Excerpt

[More information](#)

similarly, the point about all those millions whose hopes and fears and secret thoughts it represented is not whether they believed in it, but that they acted (in both senses of the word) as though they did, all the way to the end.

The rhetoric is bound to strike us as primitive and crude; in fact it was a complex, sophisticated affair. At its most blatant and obvious it had what, for want of a better word, we must call a 'positive' aspect. Hitler promised an end to unemployment (then at a figure of six million) with work in a mixed economy based on a stable currency; he promised he would rectify and revenge the *Diktat* of Versailles; he promised a greater Germany of the future, with a proud and new spirit of self-determination, based on a strong army and a new and better, 'purer' race of Germans. His plans for political hegemony, cultural dominance and economic aggrandisement entailed the conquest, subjugation and plunder of Eastern Europe, and would in all probability lead to war. All these were seen and accepted as desirable, positive goals, though not always by the same people – 'there was something in it for everybody bar the Jews'. And these goals he proclaimed in an unending series of emergencies which appeared – were meant to appear – so dire that any means to escape them would seem acceptable to the overwhelming majority of the public he addressed. Most of these promises he fulfilled.

But there was another, 'negative' aspect to this rhetoric, which sounded quite different. Like a dark undertone or a frantic curse, it accompanied each 'positive' pronouncement. It spoke of the need for sacrifice, the harshness of the road ahead, the glory of the holocaust and the supreme heroism of the last stand, 'auf verlorenem Posten'. What 'Providence' or 'the Almighty' called on Hitler and through him on Germany to do, was supremely perilous and had to be done because other, more comfort-loving and decadent nations (like the English) shunned the task – but the harder the task, the greater its value. From the internecine massacres of July 1933 onwards, and through Hitler's explicit equation of those massacred with the victims of the Munich *Putsch* of 1923, the self-destructive element in the party ideology received its public acknowledgement and ritual.