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0521024404 - The Dear Purchase: A Theme in German Modernism

J. P. Stern

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This book relates twelve major writers of German modernism to the history of the twentieth century; individual works by Thomas Mann, Musil and Hesse, and poems by Rilke, Stefan George, Benn, Brecht and Trakl are among those studied. The unifying theme is 'the dear purchase', the name here given to an ideal of moral strenuousness and sacrifice seen as characteristic of Germany after Nietzsche and Spengler. In this context, the book considers the renaissance of German poetry after 1900, the impact of the Great War, its aftermath in relativism and uncertainty, and attitudes to the Hitler period. As a self-justifying ideal 'the dear purchase' is revealed as flawed, but the conclusion juxtaposes Mann's *Felix Krull* and Kafka's story *Josephine* as offering a deliverance from its tyrannical value-system. The Introduction, partly autobiographical, traces J. P. Stern's preoccupation with this interpretation of his material in many of his books (including those concerned with Nietzsche and Hitler) and pays tribute to Wittgenstein's influence on his thinking.

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Foreword

The Dear Purchase is Peter Stern's last completed book, and also the book he spent most of his academic life writing. It is a critical study of German literature (especially fiction, poetry and non-professional philosophy) from Nietzsche to the death of Thomas Mann. That literature is seen as marked above all by a metaphysical and moral intensity named by Stern in the phrase which gives the book its title and which derives from a sonnet by the seventeenth-century poet Andreas Gryphius, quoted in Chapter I. There are also overtones of the story of Faust. Stern argues that this theme is ubiquitous in German literature of the first half of the twentieth century, and must be accounted either a partial cause, or at least a major symptom, of Germany's readiness in those years to plunge itself and the world into disaster. It is a study which he alone was qualified to write, and it was completed only just in time. He conceived it, as he tells us in his introduction, in 1957, and first published an outline of its argument in an article in *German Quarterly* in 1968. After several preliminary studies, which also turned into books, he seems to have begun drafting around 1972. The book became his principal, but not even then his only, concern when he retired from his Chair at University College, London, in 1986. He pronounced it finished, from the bed in which he was to die a few days later, in November 1991.

During that final illness he was also correcting the proofs of another book, *The Heart of Europe*, which brought together numerous published but previously uncollected essays. *The Dear Purchase*, however, was a project of a quite different kind. Long pondered and clearly focused, it was intended, more explicitly

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than any of his other literary studies, to argue a case. Particular lectures and articles were deliberately undertaken as contributions to his most sustained attempt at a literary and historical synthesis. Perhaps he felt, though if he did he never avowed it, some reluctance about a task which in its magnitude, and by its potentially systematic nature, could easily have conflicted with his preference for the art of the *petit récit*, for local clarity, and for the aphorism. Perhaps too it would have been better had the task been finished earlier. But finished it was, and the manuscript he left on his death, much of it not previously published in any form, was coherent and without serious lacunae – a work to match and complement *Re-interpretations* and *Hitler: The Führer and the People*. In one respect at least it does resemble *The Heart of Europe*, too. *The Dear Purchase* sums up and crowns a writing career characterised always by variety in unity. However varied the subjects and styles and sympathies, they are unified by an unmistakable personality and an unwavering sense of responsibility: the responsibility of literature to life, and of the critic to literature.

In reviewing *The Heart of Europe*, Ritchie Robertson has surveyed and assessed Stern's other major books (*Comparative Criticism* 15 (1994)), and that work need not be redone here. But Stern decided, rather against his prejudices and his usual practice, to begin *The Dear Purchase* in an autobiographical vein, and it may be useful if I set down something of what he does not say, and would not have dreamed of saying, about himself.

Joseph Peter Maria Stern was born on Christmas Day 1920 into a well-to-do Jewish–Catholic family in Prague. His half-sister, Ilsa, had been born to his mother, Louisa (née Bondy), in a previous marriage. His father, Gustav Stern, who was an economist and later worked for the United Nations, had fought in the Czech Legion during the First World War. Czech only was spoken in the family, and throughout his life Peter felt a natural political affinity for the Masaryk republic. At the age of eleven he began to learn German, but, apart from a year in Bavaria, during which he once saw Adolf Hitler, he had a Czech schooling, three years of it at the Comenius School in Vienna. His holidays were spent on his grandparents' farm at Zámorsk, a

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hamlet near Pardubice in Bohemia. In March 1939 Hitler's armies invaded Prague and Gustav Stern fled to London, to prepare the way for the rest of his family. But Louisa Stern could not bear to leave and, like her brother and his wife, chose suicide rather than exile. The grandparents perished in Theresienstadt. Ilsa was sent to the concentration camp at Łódź, which she eventually survived, though her husband did not. Peter escaped by walking across the border into Poland. With the protection of a British visa, issued in Katowice by 'a public school sort of chap', doing his decent bit as consul in (very) foreign parts – a type for which Peter always retained a romantic admiration – he travelled in August in a sealed train to Gdynia. On the quayside, waiting for the last boat to London, he met Erich Heller, who was to be a friend for life, and who, by his commitment to the study of twentieth-century German literature – which he introduced into the Cambridge syllabus – was to exercise a decisive influence on Stern's intellectual development. *The Heart of Europe* was dedicated to Heller, and *The Dear Purchase* is the final fruit of their friendship.

Having rejoined his father in London, Stern spent a year at Barry Grammar School, where he learned his remarkable English, and in the summer of 1940 was admitted to study economics at the London School of Economics. But the LSE was evacuated to Cambridge, where he switched his allegiance to Modern Languages (German and Russian, with Sanskrit) and to St John's College. He volunteered for the Czech army in 1941, but transferred to the Czech squadron of the RAF. In September 1942 the Wellington of which he was rear gunner was shot down 150 miles from the French coast: he lost half of his left hand and spent fourteen hours in a rubber dinghy before being picked up by a small British vessel, returning from a clandestine mission in France. In 1943 he went back to Cambridge to complete his course and the following year married his fellow student Sheila McMullan, whom he had first met in 1940.

Stern graduated in 1945 and trained as a teacher. Then, with financial help from his father, he started research on the eighteenth-century scientist, aphorist and Anglophile G. C.

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Lichtenberg, under the supervision of A. H. J. Knight and, later, of Michael Oakeshott. In 1947–8 this work took him to Göttingen, Lichtenberg's university, where, housed in the hotel Zur Sonne, he lived with the British Army and observed the nadir of German history at first hand. Before and after graduating, he was for about two years close to Ludwig Wittgenstein, who was a frequent and welcome guest of the young family at their flat in Park Parade, and later in Grange Road. Stern has recounted the beginning of that acquaintance in the Introduction to this book. In conversation he was also willing to talk about its end. Inevitable anyway, it was hastened by Stern's failure to heed Wittgenstein's advice that it was his moral duty to return to Czechoslovakia (advice of a kind which Wittgenstein readily gave, but did not receive meekly in return). It was increasingly clear to Stern, moreover, that his own first loyalty was to literature rather than philosophy. 'There is no philosopher fuller of metaphors than Wittgenstein', Stern said, 'but there is no account of metaphor *anywhere* in his work. Our own relationship broke apart on a metaphor. I had some idea about Lichtenberg and rushed round to see him one Saturday morning. I was unshaven and he was very angry. – Why did it not strike me then that he was homosexual? – "Look here, Stern", he said, "the difference between us is this: You are like the golfer cutting about and driving balls into the woods. I am the skulker on the margin, looking through the undergrowth for the balls people like you have lost. We have completely different approaches." I replied, "Yes, but the golfers are the people who are playing the game." It seems a very metaphorical argument now, but he was furious and in future would not greet me. He walked stiffly past, pretending he was blind in one eye.' Stern completed his doctoral work in 1949, and in 1950 was appointed to a teaching post at Bedford College, London. Two years later he returned to Cambridge as an Assistant Lecturer (he became a Lecturer in 1957), and was made a Fellow of St John's, where he directed studies in Modern Languages and eventually did a stint as Tutor. He contributed to Michael Oakeshott's *Cambridge Journal*, translated a German work on Leibniz, and another on Rilke's poetry, brought out his first monograph, on Ernst

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Jünger, in 1953, and rewrote his dissertation as *G. C. Lichtenberg: A Doctrine of Scattered Occasions* (1959). In 1964 *Re-interpretations* appeared – the seven profound and wide-ranging studies of nineteenth-century German prose literature which many think his best book. A companion volume, *Idylls and Realities*, came out in 1971.

Despite his Czech and Austrian upbringing, Stern's intellectual roots were in post-war Cambridge. Heller, Wittgenstein and Oakeshott – to whose names one could add that of another Prague émigré, the Jewish-Christian philosopher Paul Roubiczek – were associated, it has rightly been said,¹ with a streak of 'European conservatism' in his attitudes, and that earned him a certain disagreeable isolation in the politicised atmosphere of the 1970s. But he had no time for the New Right – let alone the Old – and he early assimilated another set of influences, more radical, and more radically literary. Leavis and Empson, he said, had been his most important critical models, along with Erich Auerbach (whom he never met). He disliked Leavis's sermonising and aggressive provincialism, but, as *The Dear Purchase* shows, never abandoned the belief that, in however derived and refined a sense, literary judgements are moral judgements too. Equally, however, he always held, perhaps rather deliberately, to the commonsensical view (not untouched by Roubiczek's Existentialism) that – when this is the issue to be decided – it is better to do good than to write about it. The contemporary critic whom he was happiest to resemble was Lionel Trilling, whom he met in 1951, and who became a close friend. I was first taught by Stern in 1965, and by then his critical stance was firmly and broadly founded and the outlines of his later work were becoming clear. To emerge from the close confines of Part One of the Cambridge Modern Languages Tripos into a second year in which one could go from R. D. Gray's classes in practical criticism to 'Dr Stern's' lectures on theories of tragedy from Aristotle to Brecht, or on 'concepts in literary criticism', was to feel oneself suddenly

¹ By Daniel Johnson, in his obituary of Stern (*The Times*, 21 November 1991), to which I am indebted for a number of biographical points. Both Mr Johnson and I owe almost all our knowledge of Stern's earlier life to Sheila Stern.

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projected to the front line of literary study. Stern later told me, as if he knew I ought to find it surprising, but wouldn't, that the colleague in Cambridge with whom he felt he had most in common was Ronald Gray. For all the unsparing marginalia with which Stern annotated his copy of Gray's *The German Tradition in Literature: 1871–1945*, *The Dear Purchase* had its origins in a similar determination not to shirk the questions raised for German literary history by the monstrous events which, casually and by the way, had ravaged Stern's family, physically wounded him, and shaped the course of his life. 'If you want to get on', a well-intentioned fellow Germanist had said to Stern when his book on Jünger appeared, 'do not write this sort of thing again'. Stern was incensed. He continued writing, and, in Cambridge at least, he did not get on.

London was different. In 1972 Stern took up England's oldest Chair of German, at University College, and an international flowering of his reputation began. *On Realism* appeared in 1973 and in 1975 he reached his widest public with *Hiller: The Führer and the People*, which was immediately translated into German, and later into French and Japanese. His interest in Nietzsche was of long standing and now became paramount: the abridged version of *A Study of Nietzsche* came out in 1978, the full version in 1979, and in 1981 he completed, with Michael Silk, the first full-length commentary on any single work of Nietzsche's, *Nietzsche on Tragedy*. Meanwhile, in 1980, as editor and contributor, he had published *The World of Franz Kafka* – that world was of course to some extent his own, and perhaps for that reason there was always something cautious or tentative about his dealings with it. It was, however, a feature of his London years that Stern resumed frequent contact with the German-speaking countries which in the fifties and sixties had for him taken second place to North America, its universities and their concerns. He did not lose his taste for the occasional foray into grand issues of critical method, but he had never had any love of literary theory without literature, and, as the tide of -isms rose from Paris to the Pacific, he came to favour the historical perspective and to concentrate on the Central European history to which in a way he belonged. Increasingly he adopted

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towards Germany the attitude of an Austro-Bohemian neighbour. He disliked the word 'forgiveness', but he refused the seductions of hatred; he admired the Federal Republic (for the GDR and its apologists he had only contempt), he wrote for German newspapers and periodicals, and he appeared on German television. After a brief return in 1968 he was unable to revisit Czechoslovakia, where he was officially categorised as a deserter from the Czech armed forces, but his interest in the Czech language and in Czech themes revived: he was particularly moved by the samizdat publication of a Czech version of his book on Hitler. (The official Czech edition came out in 1992.) In May 1990, however, he toured Czechoslovakia after its velvet revolution, seeing once again the scenes of his childhood, and speaking to local people who remembered his grandparents at Zámrsk and who, years before, voluntarily and unprompted, had set up a memorial at the place where his uncle and his aunt had died, and a headstone over their graves in the little cemetery.² Peter Stern's last journey abroad was in December 1990, when he lectured, in Czech, in Bratislava, Brno, and Prague; some of his classmates from school were in the Prague audience.

The Dear Purchase is in more than one sense therefore the work of a lifetime. Stern's sister, who after her release from Łódź had no desire to see Germany or speak German ever again, could not understand why her brother wanted to take up the study of German literature. He himself has suggested in his Introduction, in words so fine that it would not be right to repeat or appropriate them, that to understand the past is the only act of homage we can properly pay to its victims. In *The Dear Purchase* that motive is never absent from Stern's argument, nor even from his choice of material. Much of Stern's intellectual career was spent testing against each other the literary and philosophical heritages of the two countries that came to dominate his life, though he was a native of neither. English approaches to German themes were his concern. Writers in German to whom England meant much, such as Lichtenberg or Wittgenstein;

² An account of this visit will be found in one of Stern's most personal essays, 'A Crisis of Identity', Chapter 20 in *The Heart of Europe*.

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German practitioners of a genre, the realistic novel, in which the English achievement was so extensive as to be normative; German cosmopolitan thinkers with a significant English audience, such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, Spengler and Freud – these were the figures he wrote about for preference. The figures who would seem central in a picture constructed according to purely German rules of perspective – Goethe and Kant, for example, the Romantic poets, or the long line of national dramatists – were not ignored, but they did not get his fullest attention. What mattered to him, I think, was that point of interaction at which the German phenomenon took up a role in a European pattern of contending forces – became, from a European point of view, something pathological, or prophetic, or even, occasionally, typical, the future focus or the present extreme. That point was the literary analogue of the European, and more than European, conflict which had cost him so much, and from which he emerged only at the end of his life, when his Czech roots became accessible to him again. The reader of *The Dear Purchase* will find it a passionate account of a too passionate – an ‘unfriendly’ – age.³ Stern thought that age was already over when he wrote, but the reader may think it died only with him.

Although Stern regarded *The Dear Purchase* as finished, there was a considerable amount of editorial and sub-editorial work to be done before the manuscript could be sent to press. Some chapters existed in more than one version, or were disproportionately long; there were inconsistencies in the subdivision of chapters; translations had still to be provided of many passages quoted in German; and the notes – never an obsession of Stern’s – were in very varying states of completeness. All readers of the book are indebted to Sheila Stern for her long labour in resolving all these problems. Furthermore, it was not entirely clear how the book was to end. Stern had left instructions on this matter, but they were not easy to interpret, and there can be little doubt that, had he lived longer, he would

³ Stern considered using the phrase ‘the unfriendly age’, which occurs in the first lines of his Introduction to the present book, as the title of *The Heart of Europe*.

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have written more by way of conclusion.⁴ Sheila Stern was reluctant to add material of her own, and so was obliged to give to what she had a slightly different order from that which her husband would probably have chosen had he been able to do some redrafting. Generally speaking, though, the final chapters certainly reflect Stern's intentions. In September 1991 he told me he wanted to conclude with a discussion of three 'Novellen', as he called them – Kafka's *Josephine*, Mann's *Felix Krull*, and 'something by Jünger' – which would 'show how the dear purchase can be upended into its opposite, *désinvolture*'. In *Felix Krull* he said he saw the supremacy of metaphors asserted ('it's none of it what it's supposed to be, but it will do – it's grace and ease'), and so the book would complete a circle, returning to the Nietzschean account of metaphor (in 'On Truth and Falsehood in an Extra-Moral Sense') in which the process he was dealing with had in his view begun. In the event Sheila Stern was able to respect the spirit of this plan, to print virtually nothing in the main text which was not written by Peter Stern himself, and, from the materials he left, to provide a satisfactory, and characteristic, final cadence. May *The Dear Purchase* now keep alive the memory of a unique critic, a great teacher and a much-loved man.

Nicholas Boyle

HOLY INNOCENTS' DAY 1993

⁴ And probably he would have added to other chapters as well. In the same conversation to which I refer in a moment, he said that he intended to begin the Brecht section with a few points 'against the plays' ('some scenic things, such as the enthronement of the Pope, nothing on the plots or ideas'). His purpose was to explain his concentration on Brecht's poetry, a 'priority' which he felt history was 'going the way of justifying'.

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Editor's preface

During the five years that followed his retirement Peter Stern worked as a visiting Professor for periods of some months, the first and longest of which was spent at Williams College, Williamstown, Massachusetts. He felt deep gratitude for this invitation and for the unrivalled beauty of the little house in the woods, some miles from the campus, where he was allowed to live. I know he would have wished to thank the President and Faculty at Williams once more for their kindness to both of us.

He was honoured by two invitations, one to the University of California at Irvine and the other to the Vienna Kunsthochschule where he deputised for the Head of the General Studies Department who was on leave. In all these posts Peter Stern had the delight of lecturing and teaching without the burden of administrative duties, and all of them brought us new friends and opportunities for exploring. From Vienna we visited Hungary for the first time, in the depth of winter. For this and our participation in some enchanting social occasions we had many people to thank, especially Dr Bernhard Stillfried of the Austrian Foreign Ministry.

The general editorship of the series Landmarks of World Literature for Cambridge University Press was a rewarding and educative task of these years.

During this enjoyable and busy retirement the material of the present book was reworked and assembled, but at the onset of Peter's brief last illness still not fully prepared for publication. A few days before his death he handed the typescript of *The Dear Purchase* to his colleague at the Press, Kevin Taylor, and I am deeply grateful for the immediate welcome given to it by the

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Syndics, especially since its existence came as a surprise to them. The knowledge that it would be published set the author's mind at rest.

The latest section of the present book, committed to typescript in November 1991 with the author's revisions, was that on Gottfried Benn. In June 1992, with the help of Nicholas Boyle, Martin Swales and Kevin Taylor, the order of the last sections was finalised. Nicholas Boyle has read patiently and made invaluable comments. I am grateful to John Kerrigan for his advice, to Kate Brett for her patience and to Mlle Karine Grandjean for a great deal of kindness. The work of tracing references, providing notes for many chapters and translating quotations in the text has been slow for many reasons and I must take full responsibility for any inadequacies, though friends and colleagues have allowed me to consult them. I have been very much helped and encouraged by those already named, by Professor Michael Beddow and by John Sugden, formerly a pupil of Peter's at St John's College, Cambridge, and one who knows all there is to know about his work and his intentions.

Sheila Stern

JANUARY 1994