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Heroic Imagery in the Literature of the Third Reich

In 1914, during the first months of the Great War, the worker poet Heinrich Lersch took pen in hand as he was deployed on the western front and struck up a rhapsodic heroic motif in his poem “Soldier’s Goodbye” (“*Soldatenabschied*”). Its words reflect the fiery intensity of those heady days of late summer when naïve youth, like their mythical Greek forbearer Icarus, seduced by the golden beauty of the sun, launched their own flight to death:

Let me go, Mother, let me go!
 It is no use crying anymore,
 Because we are leaving, to protect the Fatherland!
 Let me go, Mother, let me go.
 I want to take your last goodbye with a kiss.
 Germany must live, even if we must die!
 Lass mich gehn, Mutter, lass mich gehn!
 All das Weinen kann jetzt nichts mehr nützen,
 Denn wir gehn, das Vaterland zu schützen!
 Lass mich gehn, Mutter, lass mich gehn.
 Deinen letzten Gruss will ich vom Mund dir küssen,
 Deutschland muss leben, und wenn wir sterben müssen.¹

This euphoric death motif set the tone for most of the war generation, as well as for the youth too young to fight in the war but not too young to dream the dream of glory on distant battlefields. After the trauma of 1918, the myth of heroic death became a central theme in the monuments devoted to the Great War. Its most dramatic embodiment was at Langemarck, the heart of the embattled terrain on the Ypres front in Flanders. There, upon entering the sacred grove of heroes, in the German memorial

¹ *Kampfgedichte der Zeitenwende. Eine Sammlung aus deutscher Dichtung seit Nietzsche*, “Die junge Reihe. Kampfgedichte der Zeitenwende” (München: Langen-Müller, undated), p. 20.

cemetery where the graves of the fallen are embraced by the same stone and cement bunkers that they once had manned, one sees the lines of Lersch's poem inscribed on the gate.

It is also revealing to walk through the storied Invaliden Cemetery in Berlin, founded by Frederick the Great and thereafter celebrated as the cemetery of national heroes. Much of it was destroyed by the ravages of World War II, as well as by German Democratic Republic building crews who devastated much of it while building the Berlin Wall in the early 1960s. Nevertheless, this mutilated and melancholy reminder of lost German honor has its own historic tales to tell. Among the tombstones there, lying in the shadow of the graves of Scharnhorst and von Moltke and the esteemed holders of the *Pour le Mèrite*, one can discern the following poem, written for his own epitaph by Major Guido von Gillhausen, commander of the Light Infantry Battalion in the Prussian Grenadier Guards Regiment Nr. 5, holder of the Iron Cross First and Second Class, and Knight of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem. In April 1918, as Gillhausen lay dying at the age of forty-eight – he had but a week to live after having been wounded in action at Villers-Brettonneux on the Somme front – he mused on his fate:

I know why I am suffering,
 And have shed my blood . . .
 I fought in the German Army
 For German sacredness,
 As a shield bearer for German honor
 For the glory of the German future!
 Therefore despite terrible pain,
 And despite the excruciating agony of my wounds
 There lives in my German heart
 Only gratefulness and the warm rays of the sun.
 Ich weiss wofür ich leide,
 Mein Blut vergossen habe . . .
 Ich stritt im deutschen Heere
 Für deutsches Heiligtum,
 Als Schildknapp deutscher Ehre
 Für deutscher Zukunft Ruhm!
 Drum lebt trotz grimmig Schmerzen,
 Trotz wundenheisse Qual
 In meinem deutschen Herzen
 Nur Dank und Sonnenstrahl.²

² Jay W. Baird, Berlin diary, June 7, 1992. Major von Gillhausen was born May 12, 1870 and died in a military hospital in Aachen, May 2, 1918. At his death he was a member of the Third Garde-Grenadier-Regiment zu Fuss. See *Ehrentafel des reichsdeutschen Adels 1914–1919* (Gotha: Justus Perthes), p. 76.

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In earlier centuries, such innocent rapture was directed to Christ and the Church, but in the modern era the secular state took on the aura of the divine. In Hitler's words, "We want no other God except Germany."³ The lyric joy in death for Germany that so many professed in the Great War soon enough would give way to the celebration of death for the new trinity of Führer, Volk, and Fatherland. Ultimately a distorted concept of heroism found Germans ascending a mountain whose grand peaks were crowned by a union of the virtues of strength, race, and intellect. The long road from Flanders and the Somme would lead to Stalingrad high above the Volga, and from Stalingrad to the acid terrain of Auschwitz. It is my hope in this work to demonstrate how the muses of poetry and literary creativity were employed to offer aesthetic accompaniment to this tragic and vainglorious quest for greatness.⁴

The agony of defeat and communist insurgency, of the postwar shame, humiliation, and hunger found its poet in Dietrich Eckart, who had a profound influence on the thinking of Hitler, Rosenberg, and Goebbels and the future course of Nazi ideology. His hard-hitting style pulled no punches and gave his assault on Bolshevism and world Jewry a resounding force and a primitive yet seductively influential attraction. The greatest attraction was to Hitler himself, however, who acknowledged his personal debt to Eckart in the development of his own political convictions. Eckart's admonition, "Germany awake!" was to be found on every National Socialist Party standard, and his frightful poem was to become a fighting song of the movement:

Storm, Storm, Storm!
 Ring the bells from tower to tower!
 Ring, so that sparks begin to fly,
 Jewry has appeared to take over the Reich . . .
 Ring out the storm, so that the world rises up
 Amidst the thunder in avenging salvation.
 Woe be to the Volk, that dreams on today,
 Germany, awake!

³ Hans Müller, "Der pseudoreligiöse Charakter der nationalsozialistischen Weltanschauung," *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, Heft 6/1961, pp. 337–52. According to Müller, this Hitler quotation was reported only in one newspaper, the *Bayerischer Kurier* Nr. 142, May 25, 1923.

⁴ One could not ask for better commentary on this theme than that offered in George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). See also Claus-Ekkehard Bärsch, *Die politische Religion des Nationalsozialismus* (München: Fink, 2002); Konrad H. Jarausch and Michael Geyer, *Shattered Past. Reconstructing German Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 111–48.

Sturm, Sturm, Sturm!
 Läutet die Glocken von Turm zu Turm!
 Läutet, dass die Funken zu sprühen beginnen,
 Judas erscheint, das Reich zu gewinnen . . .
 Läutet Sturm, dass die Erde sich bäumt
 Unter dem Donner der rettenden Rache.
 Wehe dem Volk, das heute noch träumt,
 Deutschland, erwache!⁵

For more than two generations, leading scholars and writers representing virtually every discipline have grappled with the problems posed by Germany's tragic history in the twentieth century. However, there is a serious gap in this scholarship, which until recently has almost totally ignored the literary aesthetics of the German nationalist experience. Many German and Austrian scholars, as well as the international community of Germanists – understandably longing for political and cultural transformation – have shunned the era as if there were no continuity whatsoever between the Weimar Republic, the Third Reich, the Federal Republic of Germany, and the German Democratic Republic.⁶ Richie Robertson, writing in *The Cambridge History of German Literature*, edited by Helen Watanabe-O'Kelly of Oxford University, devotes all of six pages to the entire era of the Third Reich in a work spanning over six hundred pages. Seldom in the history of literary criticism has a more poorly informed analysis been published by a writer who has quite obviously never read the works he is discussing.⁷

Ingo Roland Stoehr, in his survey of German literature in the twentieth century asserts that National Socialism is insignificant in the history of literary movements.⁸ However, it is much more illuminating to understand that the poetry and literature of the Third Reich were not written with abstract beauty and universal absolutes in mind. What was significant was its political importance and the writers of the period quite consciously

⁵ Bärsch, pp. 60–98.

⁶ There have been some notable exceptions to this rule. See, for example, Uwe-K. Ketelsen, *Literatur und Drittes Reich* (Scherfeld: SH-Verlag, 1992); Horst Denkler and Karl Prümm, eds., *Die deutsche Literatur im Dritten Reich* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1976); Ralf Schnell, *Dichtung in finsternen Zeiten* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1998); Günter Hartung, *Literatur und Ästhetik des deutschen Faschismus* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1983).

⁷ Helen Watanabe-O'Kelly, *The Cambridge History of German Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁸ Ingo R. Stoehr, *German Literature of the Twentieth Century*, Camden House History of German Literature, no. 10 (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2001), pp. 137–92.

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endeavored to further the goals of Hitler and the National Socialist program. Their writers knew just how important literature, poetry, drama, and music were in the assault on modernity. These purveyors of Nazi lyricism saw life in terms of a warrior ideal on the Homeric model, and many gave poetic expression to their belief in a *völkisch* racism and the superiority of the Germanic racial ideal. Theirs was a new historical reality, often inspired by romanticism and love for great historical figures and eras. They heard songs that others did not hear and worshipped at the altar of unchanging organic principles. The eternal German oak was their mantra. Theirs was the world of nature and Alpine beauty, of field and stream, of dense forests, of fresh snow adorning majestic pine trees. They clung to a hopeless idealization of harmonious German family life that existed only in their imagination. Many lived in a historic world peopled by long-dead heroes. They marched with the Germanic tribes under Hermann the Cherusker to victory over the legions of Caesar Augustus in the Teutoburger Forest, they heard the trumpets of Roland calling them to sacrifice against the Moors, and they joined the forces of Frederick II, Hohenstaufen, and stood witness to his glorious court at Monreale, high above Palermo in bone-dry Sicily. They formed a guard around Martin Luther against the forces of evil and rode with Frederick the Great against the enemies of Prussia. For these writers, it was only natural that they would crown the mythical edifice of the Third Reich and its leader with the laurel leaves of poetry and song.

Taken together, National Socialist poets and writers drew variations on the mystic vision of the youthful songwriter Hans Baumann, composer of the most popular political songs of the era, when, pointing to the heavens, he intoned:

Now the cathedral is standing, it's standing squarely in the light . . .
 The suffering is gone, that tore our Volk apart . . .
 And our song makes us strong and sure . . .
 The cathedral is standing, it's standing squarely in the light.
 Nun steht der Dom, nun steht er ganz im Licht . . .
 Die Not verging, die unser Volk zerriss . . .
 Und unser Lied macht sicher und gewiss . . .
 So steht der Dom, so steht er ganz im Licht.⁹

⁹ Jay W. Baird, *To Die For Germany. Heroes in the Nazi Pantheon* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 161.

Baumann's words offered an eloquent – if naïve – expression of the belief that they were the heralds of a new era, indeed prophets of Germanic fate. As Arthur Zweininger has observed, National Socialists saw themselves as victims of history, and they were determined to overcome the shame of defeat, communist insurrection, and the humiliation of Versailles.¹⁰ Their writers became Hitler's poets, validating their dreams of a brilliant future for the German Reich. Their contributions were in harmony with the movement's ideology, which at the core was based on the irrational. They were as certain of victory as their Marxist adversaries, and their belief that race was the central determinant for historical change paralleled the communist faith that dialectical materialism held all the answers to historical development.

The cultural and intellectual rebellion against modernity had roots in Central Europe going back to the French Revolution, and its enemies stood foursquare against liberalism in all its forms. They hated the city and its culture, and they loathed democracy. They were absolutely certain that “parasitical world Jewry” stood behind not only the treachery that led to defeat in the Great War but also for the culture of Weimar, which mocked traditional German values. Millions of German soldiers, they asserted, had not been killed and wounded so that the Jews could turn Berlin into a decadent, materialistic, and cosmopolitan playground, host to capitalist excess and communist putrefaction alike. When Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf* that race was the dominant factor not only in historical development but also in the formation of culture and values and that Jewry, “the bearer of a culture-destroying parasitical bacillus,” must be eradicated, he did not stand alone. Rather, his was the most radical reaction to the incendiary cultural milieu of the era. Hitler called for not only a total political transformation of the nation but a complete cultural transformation as well.

Goebbels established the ground rules for this endeavor in an address he gave at the ceremonial opening of the Reich Culture Chamber in the Berlin Philharmonic in November 1933. Hitler himself looked on as his propaganda minister addressed the theme of a new beginning for German culture. In this speech, Goebbels both established guidelines for future cultural policy and appointed the leaders of a new cultural administration, which in fact turned out to be a vast and unwieldy bureaucracy intent on

¹⁰ Bernhard Weyergraf, ed., *Literatur der Weimarer Republik 1918–1933*, Vol. 8: *Hansers Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur vom 16. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart* (München/Wien: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1995), p. 30.

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achieving the Führer's goal of a revolution in culture commensurate with the dramatic changes in the political life of the nation.¹¹ In his grandiose Ciceronian style, Goebbels boasted that after enduring a tortured period in their history, the German people had finally found themselves through National Socialism. The shackles of liberalism and parliamentary democracy, foreign to the nature of the Germanic Volk, had been overthrown. The time had now come to reconfigure German culture with artistic forms organically rooted in the soul of the people. The decadence of the Weimar Republic demonstrated that art does not and cannot stand alone as an absolute. Rather, he claimed, "from this day forward the life-threatening crisis of artists and writers has come to an end. Culture is the highest expression of the creative impulses of a people. Should the artistic man ever lose his firm grounding in the folk community on which he must depend to withstand the struggles of life, then he has delivered himself over to the enemies of civilization, and sooner or later they will destroy him." The future of Germany and its culture would be firmly grounded in a new romanticism, a "romanticism of steel," at once heroic, realistic, and aggressive. German culture needed new blood, he claimed. Leadership could only come from the young, brave artists, who were in harmony with the nation's breakout to the future, individuals who stood fearlessly on the precipice between yesterday and tomorrow, totally rejecting the failed values of the reactionary past. The way to the future lay open, he intoned. In a grandiose flourish, he invoked the words of Ulrich von Hutten to grace the proclaimed union of power and intellect in the Third Reich, saying, "What a period we live in, oh arts and sciences, what a wonderful time to be alive!"¹²

It did not take long for Germans to discover what Goebbels's visionary proclamation of a new era of fascist aesthetics based on political realities would actually mean. More often than not, pedantic dilettantism ruled the day, as most literary works had to pass the litmus test as to whether they emanated from and reflected the Aryan Volk soul. A complicated situation was made even worse through the machinations of Alfred Rosenberg, who endeavored to extend his powers as the official Nazi Party ideologist into areas involving censorship of literary and artistic endeavors, and who proceeded to establish his own Byzantine bureaucracy with a gaggle

¹¹ See Alan E. Steinweis, *Art, Ideology, and Economics in Nazi Germany. The Reich Chambers of Music, Theater, and the Visual Arts* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

¹² "Feierliche Eröffnung der Reichskulturkammer," *Börsenblatt für den deutschen Buchhandel*, Nr. 269, November 18, 1933.

of offices dealing in cultural red tape.¹³ Three years later, Rosenberg's bureaucratic minion, *Reichskunstwart* Franz Moraller, proudly reviewed the accomplishments of the Reich Culture Chamber in an address to the leaders of the publishing industry in Berlin. The book was truly the "sword of the spirit," he claimed, and how splendid it was that once and for all the "Jewish-Bolshevik cultural anarchy" and its inciters had been swept away. No exceptions had been made, he claimed, to the overarching obligation of every single artist to fight and to write for the Volk in the Nationalist Socialist spirit. The artist of the future, he submitted, the writer of the Third Reich, comes from the marching columns of the Sturmabteilungen (SA), and he, too, is ready to fight and die for the people. The "blood-red flags of the Movement" link the past and the future and inspire the artist to conceive of and to create the new National Socialist man.¹⁴

Many right wing intellectuals and cultural conservatives demanded the destruction of liberal institutions and the political culture which they fostered. Many conservative literary figures had joined in the assault on Weimar Germany and taken together, their ideas formed the basis for the breathtaking changes to come in the Third Reich. Many of them believed firmly in the idea that race determined culture, and their cultural criticism was in harmony with the parameters Hitler, Goebbels, and Rosenberg had established. The novelist and critic, Erwin Guido Kolbenheyer, was a leading herald for the Germanic cause, calling on the nation's writers to think heroically and to write heroically. They were obliged to form a united cultural front in the sacred struggle for freedom. "Creativity rests on the foundation of race," he posited, and the muses must enter the struggle against the Americanization and Bolshevization of German culture. The nation was not in a cancerous Spenglerian decline, he affirmed. Quite the contrary, it was engaged in a life or death struggle against the forces of mediocrity. Greatness, he was certain, was assured if only the muses would return the national gaze toward the stars.¹⁵ The critic Ludwig Friedrich

¹³ See Ernst Piper, *Alfred Rosenberg. Hitlers Chefideologe* (Munich: Karl Blessing, 2005), pp. 323–99.

¹⁴ Reichskunstwart Franz Moraller, "Buch und Volk," *Der deutsche Schriftsteller. Zeitschrift für die Schriftsteller in der Reichsschrifttumskammer*: 5 (May 1936), pp. 97–8. See also Franz Moraller, personnel file, Reichsschrifttumskammer, Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde (herein after cited as BAB).

¹⁵ E. G. Kolbenheyer, *Die volksbiologischen Grundlagen der Freiheitsbewegung* (München: Langen/Müller 1933). See also Ulrike Hass, "Vom Aufstand der Landschaft gegen Berlin," in *Literatur der Weimarer Republik 1918–1933*, pp. 358–9.

Barthel struck the same motif when he proclaimed that “where our blood ends, Germany ends as well.”¹⁶

The writer Wilhelm Schäfer parodied foreign and Jewish assaults on the Third Reich in an address he delivered in Berlin titled “The German Return to the Middle Ages.” In a highly articulate, rhetorically eloquent style, he launched into an attack on European culture since the Enlightenment. Like so many conservatives of the era, his critique of modern culture was based on his admiration for the medieval world. He interpreted that era as an integrated, class-based, God-centered, absolutist culture grounded in battle and struggle, the antithesis of what he assayed to be a modern concern for the popular welfare. Such a world had colonized the East, when the Cross, united with the Sword, formed the dual columns of sovereignty. This, Schäfer noted, led to a heroic worldview whereby “all of life was grounded in the mystery of eternity.”¹⁷ This grand edifice has been replaced with the shallow and superficial modern concept of progress, in a world in which bravery, loyalty, pride, and naturalness had no place. Greed and the endless, stultifying chase after material wealth and the new idolatry of technology made modern man think he was the ruler of the earth. Gradually, the self-satisfaction of modern man with his toys became a way of life, and ultimately he would choke on technology. Modern man had even learned to fly. Yet curiously, Schäfer observed, his soul could not fly with him into the heavens. It had become so besotted with sensational new discoveries that it simply could not take off and instead remained earthbound, mired in vacuous mediocrity. Even knowledge could not feed the soul, hanging as it was on the tree of progress. All this stopped abruptly, however, in 1914, when all the old leaves blew down in one rush of wind. Those who returned in 1918 knew only one thing: “man, his duty, and Germany.” Henceforth, “only the Volk can give meaning to history.” This was the true meaning of the birth of the Third Reich, Schäfer proclaimed. This was a “return” not to medieval depravity – as Germany’s enemies would have it – but rather a return to the Germanic peoples’ true heroic nature.¹⁸

The academic literary critic Heinz Kindermann, a professor of literature at the University of Münster, drew variations on these themes in a work that summarized the central motifs of what he considered to be a

¹⁶ Ludwig Friedrich Barthel, *Vom Eigentum der Seele* (Jena: Eugen Diederichs, 1941).

¹⁷ Wilhelm Schäfer, *Der deutsche Rückfall ins Mittelalter* (München: Langen/Müller, 1934).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

reborn German culture. Literary values had been completely transformed in the new era, he proclaimed, as the perverted literary movements of Expressionism and New Reality faded into the dustbin of history. “Show me your view of the past, and I will show you what kind of a future you are worthy of,” he wrote. German letters, he argued, clearly had been as decadent as the Weimar Republic, whose leaders did everything possible to foster and cultivate its weak, cosmopolitan literary effusions. Man and nature would be joined, as the “I” gave way to the “we” of the folk community, where the individual found true freedom by surrendering to the racial whole. Henceforth, Kindermann argued, a noble, tragic-heroic worldview would be joined with an organic-biological racial consciousness, resulting in the flowering of a grand literary culture. The “rhythm of immortality” would flow spontaneously from its source deep in the spring of the eternal Germanic life source as cosmic beauty replaced decrepit, craven and materialistic democratic values.¹⁹

The glory of the new era was that once more – as in the great days of Hölderlin and Schiller – the literary arts would chart the way to a Germanic golden age. The road to this future had, however, been paved in the blood of Flanders Fields, Verdun, and the Somme. The German spirit had been reborn in that tragic struggle. “Comradeship became the ruling standard for life,” he submitted, offering consolation in defeat and an eternally renewing confidence in the final victory. Comradeship was the new blood of life, offering what the lettered front writer Paul Alverdes called the grace of the “eternal truth” that replaced reason and all concerns of self-interest. Duty and love of the flag ruled over all other considerations. Mass death at the front had brought the rebirth of the soul and returned the German vision back to what was real. In the simple but profound words of Ernst Jünger, “We had gotten to know the earth once more.”²⁰

The educator and literary critic Arno Mulot put a sinister twist on the front experience in his essay “The Soldier in German Literature of Our Era.” The comradeship demonstrated by German soldiers was unique, he claimed, a world apart from the perfidious defeatist values celebrated in Weimar war literature. In no way could its alienating and world-weary pacifism be compared to the beauty of the unifying inner spirit of the real German soldiers. Mulot wasted no words in describing the reason

¹⁹ Heinz Kindermann, *Die deutsche Gegenwartsdichtung im Kampf um die deutsche Lebensform* (Wien: Wienerverlagsgesellschaft, 1942).

²⁰ The poet Herybert Menzel believed in this primal truth as well, as demonstrated when he wrote the memorable line, “Earth, we belong to you.” *Ibid.*, pp. 23–4.