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Edited by Nicholas Saul

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: German literature and philosophy**Nicholas Saul*

‘[T]he intermingling of philosophical and literary ideas’, Peter Stern once wrote, is a ‘commonplace of German literary history’. Apart from his own studies of the ‘traffic between literature and philosophy’,¹ a long list might be compiled of studies which aim somehow to explain German literature since 1700 in philosophical terms, from (to name but a few) Hermann August Korff’s *Geist der Goethezeit* (1923–53; *Spirit of the Goethean age*),² via Nicholas Boyle’s philosophical reading of Goethe’s ‘Vermächtniß’ (1979; ‘Testament’)³ to Géza von Molnár’s *Goethes Kantstudien* (1993; *Goethe’s Kant studies*).⁴ The list of studies which look at German philosophy from a literary angle of some kind might not be quite as long, but would still be impressive.⁵ Now such lists would scarcely prove that German literature, by comparison with literature in other languages, exhibits some special relationship with philosophy (however defined), still less an intrinsic one. And yet how often do modern German writers signal that their literary works were prompted by reading philosophy. Johann Christoph Gottsched (not a great writer, but an important one) builds the early eighteenth-century reform of German literature on the intellectual reforms of Leibniz-Wolffian philosophy. Schiller is the very paradigm of the *poeta philosophus*. The Romantic Friedrich von Hardenberg (Novalis) founds his entire literary *œuvre* on an intensive study of Fichte. Kleist becomes a poet only after having endured a crisis of knowledge in the name of Kant. Thomas Mann is habitually read through Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. And this is not to mention other well-known or popularly accredited cases such as Goethe and Spinoza (or Leibniz), Heine and Hegel, Hofmannsthal and Mach, Brecht and Marx, Bernhard and Wittgenstein, Jelinek and Freud (or Marx), Botho Strauß and Adorno.

But even if we allow for heuristic purposes the claim of a special relationship between German literature and philosophy, of what kind might their relation be? Co-operation between equals on the basis of an agreed division of intellectual labour? Subordination of one discourse

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to another? Criticism of one by another? Mutual antagonism? Irreducibly occasionalistic interaction? Final incommensurability, despite everything? Stern for his part dismissed the ‘distinction between “literature” and “thought”’ as ‘the source of much pedantry’. For him, that distinction became ‘less than self-evident where ideas are treated as living things’ and should be kept ‘relative . . . to the overall creative achievement, which is . . . an exploration of human possibilities in a given historical setting’.⁶

Since those words were written by a leading exponent of the intellectual history of literature, and weighty as that judgement is, many landmarks have shifted on our intellectual horizon – yet not, perhaps, towards positions he would have approved. Much has been done on literature and philosophy in individual writers and works. In particular a great deal of work has been done on the *general* aspect of the relation, beyond the confines of any national literature. But it seems nonetheless that till now a major scholarly task has remained undone. If many have examined the interplay of literary and philosophical discourse at the level of the individual writer and work and at the level of philosophical aesthetics, little research has yet been conducted into the *concrete dialogue of literature and philosophy in Germany, as a whole, through the history of modernity*. This volume thus seeks for the first time, not merely to reflect philosophically on what literature is, and so make one more contribution to literary theory, but to reconstruct, analyse and evaluate how poets and philosophers in Germany really *did* interact with one another through their writings, epoch by epoch, in the modern period as a whole. The authors of the chapters in this book neither followed nor rejected any particular theory or method, but rather allowed argument to flow unpredictably from concrete engagement with the material. It is not the purpose of this introduction to pre-empt the findings of the following chapters, but certain patterns do emerge.

The dominant of John A. McCarthy’s opening chapter, ‘Criticism and experience: philosophy and literature in the German Enlightenment’, is co-operation, a term that precludes any easy division of labour between literature and philosophy in the German eighteenth century. It is hardly surprising that this epoch is the cradle of modern aesthetics – as one possible synthesis of the two discourses. But the main achievement of the German Enlightenment in the context of our question is to ally philosophy and literature in the first place. The thrust of the German Enlightenment consists, as McCarthy shows, in the use of literature and philosophy alike as the ‘epistemic tools’ (p. 27) of a grand,

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fundamentally anthropocentric project: the systematic exploration of the self in its manifold relationships with inner self, community, nature and God, and the concomitant translation of those abstract findings into practical human fact in the cause of perfection. But it is clear that here philosophy is constantly *primus inter pares*, leaving aesthetics and literature with the role of executor. Leibniz, for example, formulates principles which *inter alia* explain the structure of the world as the realisation of maximum unity in multiplicity and the journey of the soul as progress to perfection. Bodmer's and Breitinger's aesthetics translate the former into the model of modern (organic) aesthetic form; Wieland's novels the latter into the model form of human existence. Similarly Wolff's notion of human reason as analogous to divine creativity underlies not only the theory of creative artistry in the didactic poetics of Gottsched, Bodmer and Breitinger, but also the full-blown theory of artistic genius in Klopstock, Hamann, Herder, and the *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress). Haller's idylls, Gellert's sentimental comedies, Laroche's novel, Wieland's comic narratives, all serve the end of human improvement through imaginative instantiations of philosophical ideals which appeal to the reason, will and feeling of their recipients. Even Hamann's and Herder's ideals of greatness of personality, energy and enthusiasm are less counter-Enlightenment programmes than critical radicalisations of the original project; indeed, the literature of the Classic-Romantic epoch, as exemplified by Goethe's reception of Spinoza, Leibniz and Kant, represents but a refinement of these optimistic ideals.

Nicholas Saul's 'The pursuit of the subject. Literature as critic and perfecter of philosophy 1790-1830' argues by contrast for the growing divergence of philosophers' and poets' self-understanding in the Classic-Romantic epoch, as intellectuals struggle to explain the disproportion between the ideals of Enlightenment and the reality of the French Revolution, and to assess the consequences of this for Germany. With Schiller and Goethe, literature emerges for the first time as a discourse which gives voice to something philosophy silences. Kant had replaced the Enlightenment notion of the unitary self with something fragmented and deficient. Knowledge of the world of appearances is securely founded by analogy with empirical science, but only at the price of a dualism which leaves the essential nature of the self – and things – unknowable. The categorical imperative offers comfort. As moral autonomy realised, it is the foundation of a postulated metaphysic. But as Schiller sees, moral action in Kant's dictatorial style is not only liberation (of intellect) but also enslavement (of sense) – thus entailing a further division of human

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nature. All this is the signature of a modernity in which Enlightenment has missed its path, and the untrammelled exercise even of critical reason has failed to realise reason's project. Philosophy, Schiller concludes, is no longer up to the job, and he advances aesthetic experience, with its characteristic harmonious synthesis of intellect and sense, as the sole restorer of human wholeness. Literature is thus no longer quite what it was, the amicable executor of a project primarily defined by philosophy. Schiller accepts the authority of Kantian criticism. But he also suggests much more strongly than Kant that philosophical reflection faces strict limits, and places the entire practical sphere, in particular corporeality, under the legislation of art. With the Romantics, this divergence of literature and philosophy deepens. Rejecting Fichte's compromise solution to the problem of grounding absolute subjectivity in reflection, they far exceed Schiller's promotion of aesthetic experience. For Hardenberg, Friedrich Schlegel and the rest, the ground of subjectivity can only be intuited, only aesthetic discourse will serve as the means to re-present the lost ground of the subject in the phenomenal world, and even then only as self-consciously experimental, ironically self-relativising constructions which symbolise unending progress to perfection. Thus the Enlightenment project stands until Hegel under the influence of Romantic aestheticism and its faith in redemptive intuitions of wholeness. Not philosophy but literature takes on the task of healing the divided modern subject, with ever-increasing cognitive ambition and finally mythical status. The Romantic faith in redemptive intuitions reaches its height in the popular philosophy of G. H. Schubert, who rejects all philosophical reflection in favour of clairvoyant-oneiric revelations of nature's hidden truth. But the Romantic consensus eventually erodes. Kleist not only becomes a poet following his philosophical crisis, but also deconstructs the cognitive hubris of Romantic poesy in his own variant of Romanticism. Hegel represents the philosophical backlash. For him, the Romantics as modernist writers are not so much the cure as the symptom of modernity's sickness, division. Purporting to heal the rift of absolute and world in the construct of a truly self-knowing subjectivity, they in fact mix vague intuition with empirical fact in an exhibition of formalist shallowness, thus perpetuating the division. Not intuition but thought, rightly understood as the subject that is concretely, fully and transparently in and for itself, is the sole legitimate means to work through contradiction to resolution. The epoch of art as this function of absolute consciousness is by definition past.

John Walker, in his chapter 'Two realisms: German literature and philosophy 1830-1890', finds that the unfolding dialogue of philosophy and

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literature fails to confirm Hegel's prognosis of the future of Romantic art and deepens the discursive rift. The tradition of German idealist thought had always assumed the reality reflectively treated by philosophy and philosophical aesthetics to be co-extensive with the reality imaginatively treated by the works of art themselves, so that both discursive domains in this sense share a common 'realistic' focus. This fundamental idealist tenet, Walker shows, loses its validity over the course of the nineteenth century, and a dichotomy emerges between the 'reality' of the philosophers and that of the writers. Thus whilst the Hegelian tradition continues to dominate German official philosophy for much of the nineteenth century, it increasingly fails to reflect the relation of the modern subject to reality and so to achieve reconciliation. In the 1830s and 1840s alternative modes are sought. They turn out in the work of Heine and the writers of *Das junge Deutschland* (Young Germany) to be aesthetic, and to aim more at social and ideological criticism than philosophical reconciliation. There occurs a concomitant shift in the dominant productive mode of creative writers, from drama to novel. For Hegel the drama resolves substantive private–public conflicts without unsettling contradictory residues. Yet in this drama conspicuously fails. Grabbe's work modulates philosophy into satire, Hebbel's functions as social critique against the grain of its would-be Hegelian framework. Büchner analyses the profound disproportion between philosophico-political discourse and reality in *Dantons Tod* (1835; *Danton's death*). Meanwhile the novel develops its own, autonomous mode of *aesthetic* reflection on reality. Keller's and Stifter's socio-semiotic anatomisations offer analysis of society *as* representation (typically German in this politically retarded century) and a critical assessment of the *validity* of such representations of the underlying (modern) realities. It is this internal reflective dynamic of literature, built not on Hegelian thought but on the Classic-Romantic achievement, which marks German literature in the nineteenth century as characteristically German. German literary realism of this century may reflect a social reality different from that in other great western European cultures, in that Germany was less urbanised, centralised and industrialised, and German culture thus perhaps in terms of content more provincial, particularist and inward-looking. Yet the characteristic inwardness does not reflect an ideologically unquestioning aesthetic retreat from reality, so much as the insight *that* reality is a construct, and a deeply reflective critical questioning *of* that construct, which finally performs the Hegelian task of modern self-understanding in a deeply un-Hegelian way. Fontane's novels mark the apogee of literary development

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in an epoch when school philosophy such as that of Dilthey renounces the possibility of grasping the sense of society and is increasingly dissociated from public life.

Ritchie Robertson's 'Modernism and the self 1890–1924' reveals two shifts in the received terms of negotiation between philosophy and literature. Attention is focused as before on problems of representation. But now, in a neo-Romantic turn, it is again directed to the individual subject, which is seen in isolation from the community and held to be in crisis. Moreover contemporary philosophy – in Enlightenment, Romanticism and the first half of the nineteenth century always volubly present in the public sphere – is now, in the guise of Marburg and Heidelberg neo-Kantianism and following the late nineteenth-century trend, confined increasingly to the school. Literary writers around 1900 engage in dialogue less with Frege and Husserl than latecomers unrecognised in their own time (Schopenhauer and Nietzsche) or still-influential thinkers of earlier generations (Darwin) and their popularisers. In this constellation, literary writers tend to absorb intellectual and imaginative models rather than crisply defined concepts from philosophical sources, and to challenge philosophy by asking how its claims would look if one lived by them. The terms of engagement between philosophy and literature around 1900 consist, then, in the testing by writers of several current philosophical models of the self. Confronted by the materialism and determinism of the impersonal universe invoked by positivist natural science, some writers of the early phase (Hauptmann) propagate a popularised social Darwinism. Impressionism tests the 'punctual self' (Charles Taylor) of Cartesian reason in its modern Viennese realisation. Where Mach and Bahr see identity as the illusion of a coherent subject only seeming to underlie the ultimate reality of impressions blossoming and fading, Hofmannsthal emphasises memory as the substrate of the self's inner continuity and explores the ethical consequences of his counter-vision. Other writers experiment with the construct of the embattled self they find in Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, which strives to overcome the threat to its existence by exertion of will. Mann's Thomas Buddenbrook battles heroically against the tide of change for institutions he knows to be doomed but will neither change nor allow to die, never understanding that his struggle masks the failure to encounter the fact of his own mortality. At the centre of the interaction between philosophy and literature in this epoch is however a discourse neither quite philosophy, nor quite literature (though it partakes richly of both), Freud's psychoanalytic theory of the enfeebled self perched atop the unconscious like a rider on his

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horse. Mann, Hofmannsthal and Beer-Hofmann use literary dreams in their Freudian significance (regressions to the pre-civilised state) as moral warnings to their dreamers. Others from Buber to Heym extend the notion of dream far beyond Freud's intention, to encompass the modern mysticism of the literary epiphany: a compensatory vision of oneness with a meaningless universe. Only rarely does school philosophy impinge on the literary quest for modern selfhood, as when Hofmannsthal encounters the icily abstract phenomenology of Husserl in 1906. Rilke's 'Dinggedichte' ('thing-poems') and Hofmannsthal's privileged object intuitions seem strangely to resemble the reduction to the pure contents of consciousness practised by phenomenological investigation – even if the poet's aim (sensual enrichment) is hardly that of the austere philosopher.

In 'The subjects of community. Aspiration, memory, resistance 1918–1945' Russell Berman shows official German culture after the First World War to have ossified into a life lie. Philosophy still inhabits the private world of the schools. Thus literature, allied with Freudian and Nietzschean tendencies on the wilder shores of thought, leads the assault on the Wilhelmine organisation of the landscape of meaning. Rejecting high modernism's introspection, writers and thinkers identify community as the locus of reflection on alternative sources of meaning. Max Weber stands for compromise with the old order. He sees rationalistic modern culture as having fragmented into unmediated spheres of specialised knowledge. But he defends official culture against the charge of total bureaucratisation, defends the received dichotomy of aesthetic and political institutions, and warns against irrationalist, 'prophetic' short-cuts to found new structures of public meaning. Traditional and legal sources of legitimate renewal are nonetheless exhausted, so that Weber, whether intentionally or not, opens the way for 'charismatic', aesthetic discourse to design a vast variety of redemptive models of meaning, in which the liberal subjective tradition is slowly submerged. Expressionism urges connection with a vitalistic totality, but fails to achieve concrete conceptual clarity and too often accepts the socio-political establishment it ostensibly opposes. Dada's radical anti-logocentrism rejects all dichotomies of aesthetic and public institutions (especially art and politics) in the name of the identity of life and art. But its decentred anarcho-communist tendencies are countered by the inheritors of the Nietzschean tradition of the embattled self, figures loosely allied under the banner of a 'conservative revolution'. Gundolf insists in stark contrast to Dada that charismatic poetic language is the source of authentic cultural life in alienated and mechanistic modernity. Only a poetic leader such as George can re-instil

authentic spirituality into art, and so Gundolf finally promotes a spiritualised and personalised yet apolitical cult of the aesthetic. Bertram's musical nationalism, Jünger's battlefield existentialism, Thomas Mann's *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (1919; *Considerations of an unpolitical man*) are variations on this theme. The left meanwhile radicalises these received positions. Brecht marks Marxism's aesthetic turn. He rejects bourgeois individualism and propagates an engaged, if highly complex literature addressed to a collective subject. But if his self-consciously experimental art reveals Brecht's affinity with modernism, Lukács makes the break between this great aesthetic trend and Marxism. The modernist acceptance of cognitive fragmentation and subjectivist perspectivism is, he says, incompatible with the Marxist demand for objective totality and singular intelligibility as evidenced by the nineteenth-century realist tradition. Benjamin, by contrast, reveals the continued influence of Romanticism. Like Brecht, he denies the auratic status of the work of art, the emancipatory energies of which are unfolded in Romantic style through philosophical-critical reception. But Benjamin also rejects the Marxian belief in art's influence on political development. History is modernistically discontinuous, and change is occasioned by epiphanic irruptions from another domain into time's immanent flow. Mann's *Der Zauberberg* (1924; *The magic mountain*) and Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929), with their scepticism of any received developmental model and postponement of redemption, exemplify the resultant diminished status of the modern individual. Psychoanalysis and the related work of Schnitzler seal its fate. Finally, even philosophy looks to art for semantic redemption. Heidegger, in another recourse to the Romantic position, argues authentic art to be the only medium capable of disclosing the irreducibly agonistic situation of existence in a modernity dominated by redundant critical chatter. The *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1944–7; *Dialectic of Enlightenment*) of Horkheimer and Adorno formulates perhaps the most influential diagnosis of the fate of philosophy in German modernity: Enlightenment, the mainstream occidental tradition of thought, is in crisis. Its great achievement, the concept, has turned into its opposite, a means of control and eradication of difference. Only high, formally difficult art contains in hermetically sealed form a source of utopian energy and truth. Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus* (1947) contains the retrospective sum of these tendencies of the epoch. Leverkühn's Adornian espousal of rebarbative, difficult art and abandonment of the liberal humanistic tradition is the only way forward for the aesthetic recovery of the subject.

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Robert C. Holub's 'Coming to terms with the past in postwar literature and philosophy' captures the break and continuity of German culture after World War Two. If the self-consciousness of writers and thinkers in earlier parts of the modern era had been informed above all by the sentimental recall of something positive lost (individual wholeness, the immediate relation of individual and community) in the name of a future which might recreate it, this time is dominated by the necessity to remember something deeply negative – the collective shame of National Socialism and the Holocaust – and the recuperation of its meaning in the name of a future which must be different. It was a task performed under contrasting conditions in West and East Germany, and, in contrast to the preceding epoch, it has been equally shared by philosophy and literature. At first it was failure they shared. On the philosophical side, Horkheimer and Adorno had proposed with the *Dialektik der Aufklärung* a philosophical framework capable of accounting, if not specifically for fascism, then at least for the rise of totalitarian systems of cultural control in modernity through the domination of the concept. But these exiled voices were heard in Germany only in the 1960s. Until then, the astonishingly thin public discourse on the heritage of shame in Germany was dominated by the ambivalent responses of Jaspers and Heidegger. Jaspers's ready acceptance of Germany's political and criminal responsibility for the war also involved rejection of any substantive concept of collective guilt, in the sense of that which might be legitimately punished by authority, so that individual Germans were left to their own devices in facing up to the past. Heidegger, continuing an amoral tradition of German thought and letters, avoided the issue. Until Grass, the early postwar literature of Böll and Borchert mirrors this asymmetry of grief, in that the returning soldiers are ultimately presented from the standpoint of immediate singular experience, as victims rather than as somehow complicit. Even Celan's celebrated 'Todesfuge' (1948, 'Death fugue'), which attempts to write the experience of the Holocaust from the Jewish standpoint in musical figures transcending conventional semantics, runs the risk of unwittingly transfiguring horror. Only with Grass's *Blechtrommel* (1959; *The tin drum*) is a literary language – that of a deranged dwarf in an anti-*Bildungsroman* – found in which the Nazi past might be captured, and Grass's sequel *Katz und Maus* (1961; *Cat and mouse*) figures the collective complicity of the Germans for the first time through its thematisation of denial and subtle perspectivist entwining of the fellow traveller's and victim's views. With the generational divide of the 1960s and especially in the semi-documentary and historically ambitious works of Hochhuth

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and Weiss, the accusation of complicity and the location of the Holocaust in wider contexts of understanding dominates the literary scene. If the spirit of Adorno is discernible in these literary developments, it is only with the rise of the philosopher of the public sphere, Jürgen Habermas, that German philosophy proper seeks critically to come to terms with its inheritance. Any philosophy which fails to address this issue, from Gadamer's ideologically indifferent hermeneutics to Luhmann's value-free systems theory, is engaged by Habermas in a public dialogue. This, true to the premises of his own philosophy, seeks to expose received arguments to the process of open, intersubjective legitimation, criticism and consensus-building which is the utopian engine of his own thought, the counter-image of National Socialist totality, and his alternative to the dialectic of Enlightenment. In the East, the issue of fascism was simply equated with capitalism and exported to West Germany, later to return. Philosophy (predictably in real-existing socialism) was silent, and early East German literature focused almost exclusively on building socialism. Only with Becker's *Jakob der Lügner* (1968; *Jacob the liar*) is the Jewish Holocaust experience posed as a common German heritage, and only with Christa Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster* (1976; *Patterns of childhood*) does a German, who is also an East German and a German woman, critically reconstruct the past and present reality of her damaged subjectivity, the saturation with National Socialist, anti-Semitic values, in a framework beyond that offered by East German ideological orthodoxy. The unification of Germany sealed a trend which had begun in the early 1980s with Helmut Kohl's self-proclaimed 'grace of a late birth' and the increasing desire for the normalisation of German cultural life. Following this trend, the attention of German intellectuals turned away from the ethical and political issues raised by the catastrophe of modernity and towards postmodern, 'new subjectivist' forms of aesthetic and existential experimentation. These gravitated naturally towards easy nationalism and cultural conservatism. Habermas has been prominent among philosophers in defending the positive inheritance of modernity, in particular the autonomy of the modern spheres of rationality in Weber's tradition, against the use of aesthetic categories to elide their legitimacy and erect an anti-Enlightenment. Both, for him, derive ultimately from the Hegelian tendency to devalue individuality and critique. He and Manfred Frank share suspicion of any attempt to undermine the foundations of autonomous subjectivity. In the work of Ransmayr and Schlink it is evident that writers of fiction also share Habermas's view that the past, despite everything, has yet to be mastered.