

## REFLECTIVITY AND THE NOVEL

### Thoughts on the English and German Narrative Traditions

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Many years ago a colleague told me that she had just been re-reading Charles Dickens's ›Oliver Twist‹. She had been (yet again) bowled over by the scene in which Oliver, still hungry, asks for more. What similar moment, she wondered, might one find in the nineteenth-century German novel, a scene that would be in the same league as regards aesthetic power and moral resonance? I was somewhat nonplussed; but I then pointed to the moment when, in Chapter 34 of Fontane's ›Effi Briest‹, the eponymous protagonist says: “Es ist komisch, aber ich kann eigentlich von vielem in meinem Leben sagen: ‘beinahe.’” This statement, one that seeks to understand and express felt deprivation is quite wonderful in its richness of implication and opens up many more interpretative possibilities than does Oliver's plaintive plea. But it is a moment of thoughtfulness and reflectivity rather than the expression of visceral need which we get from Dickens.

One could generalize this point of contrast. One might suggest that the scene from Dickens, like so many in nineteenth-century English fiction, is unforgettable in bringing alive the felt practicalities of social living, the stresses and strains of literally and metaphorically coping with anxieties as to where the next meal is coming from. Whereas more often than not the German novel has world enough and time to ruminate, to question, to reflect. This may have not a little to do with the prestige, in nineteenth-century German letters, of the *Bildungsroman*, that novel of growing up which has less to do with the hard contours of getting by in an unrelievable harsh world than with the need to understand the gradually unfolding complexity of individual selfhood. Goethe is, of course, a key witness here. One thinks not only of his ›Wilhelm Meister‹ project, which was so often hailed by subsequent writers as the paradigmatic *Bildungsroman*, but also of the fact that so many of his narrative works have interpolated, inserted texts – and this structural constellation generates a climate of reflectivity, reflectivity about what happens in the process of

telling and responding to stories. By contrast, the English novel is more strenuously realistic – admirably suited, by that token, to film and television adaptation. To say this much is, of course, to rehearse well-known truisms; and I hope, in this speech, to differentiate the truisms a little by hearing the two novel traditions, the English and the German, in dialogue with each other. Put schematically: I shall comment on two classics of high modernist German novel writing and suggest that they offer profound reflections not just on processes of self-conscious narrativity but also on the workings of novelistic realism. And I hope to illuminate the reflectivity that informs the resolutely realistic universe of the English novel. After all, the narrative traditions of the two countries and cultures are anything but hermetically sealed. On either side of its nineteenth-century realistic corpus the English tradition is no stranger to the novel's ability to be self-conscious. ›Tristram Shandy: is nothing but reflections on a life story that never quite gets told. And with James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, the spectrum of novel writing in English embodies reflectivity and conceptual energy. Moreover, much recent work on novel realism has stressed the importance of a certain rhetoric, a rhetoric of referentiality (Barthes, Furst, Prendergast, Riffaterre)<sup>1)</sup>, whereby the society evoked in the novel exists not just in the materiality of its being (in the streets, rooms, furnishings which are so often circumstantially described), but also in the mental furniture, in the assumptions, symbols and values by which and in which the characters live, move, and have their being. I want particularly to focus on the question of value and values. My starting point is with an English critic, F. R. Leavis, who, while focusing primarily on a Russian text, ›Anna Karenina‹, makes the link with the English tradition, with D. H. Lawrence, and with the quest for value and significance that animates the realistic novel's artistic and ethical trajectory:

[...] the concern for significance that is the principle of life in Anna Karenina is a deep spontaneous, lived question, or quest. The temptation in wait for Tolstoy is to relax the tension [...] by reducing the 'question' into one that can be answered – or, rather, one to which a seemingly satisfying answer strongly solicits him: that is, to simplify the challenge life actually is for him and deny the complexity of his total knowledge and need.<sup>2)</sup>

Leavis goes on to insist that ›Anna Karenina‹ is centrally concerned with the values inherent in the lived experience of the characters, and the values which we, as readers, activate in our experience of reading the novel. There is, for Leavis, an undeniable didactic impulse in evidence, but it is one that is at every turn checked by the sheer realistic abundance of the novelist's sympathy. (Interestingly, Thomas Mann argues something similar in his 1940 essay on ›Anna Karenina‹. He insists that Tolstoy's commitment to the moral trajectory of his novel is sustained in the teeth of the almost titanic worldliness which flows from his allegiance to the sheer

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<sup>1)</sup> See LILIAN R. FURST, "All is true": the Claims and Strategies of realistic Fiction, Durham and London 1995.

<sup>2)</sup> F. R. LEAVIS, ›Anna Karenina‹ and other Essays, London 1967, p. 12.

materiality of human experience.) At the heart of Leavis's essay is the belief that ›Anna Karenina‹ exacts from us a two-fold process of recognition. At one level, we acknowledge the fictive world put before us as truthful, as having a purchase on life, on the way we lived then, or live now, or might live in the future. But recognition also implies knowing again, knowing anew, knowing afresh. And in this dimension of our re-knowing we find ourselves asking how we may live aright, and that arightness can be ethical, political, sexual, existential. Realism offers us a reflection of, and a reflection on, the values that do, can, or should animate the real. Indeed, it is the glory of such novel-writing that the values exist both in quotational mode – they are the property of the characters' self-consciousness – and also in the discursivity of narratorial and readerly reflectivity.

Let me give three instances of what I mean. I shall begin with the opening sentence of a novel that enjoys immense popularity. And it is a sentence that I would give my eye teeth to have written: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife." This is, of course, the virtuosic opening flourish of Jane Austen's ›Pride and Prejudice‹. The irony is delicious. The opening fanfare takes us, or so we might expect, into high places of speculative philosophy, of existential profundity. We might think, for example, of a passage such as the following from a recent novel where the intertextual reference to Jane Austen is unmistakable:

It is a paradox universally acknowledged that the experiences which the individual regards as the most private are in fact the most common. Birth, procreation, and death bind us together into a shared web, forming an inseparable nexus between the individual and humanity as a whole.<sup>3)</sup>

But Jane Austen has no such grandiose universals up her impeccably embroidered sleeve. The seemingly sovereign authorial opening to the novel is, in fact, quotational. The moment of reflectivity with which ›Pride and Prejudice‹ opens is anchored in the characters' self-understanding. If there is an authoritative, perhaps authorial, as it were Archimedean, site of definitive cognition, it is present by implication as the high comedy of manners is played out before us. But only by implication. On the whole the novel is content to eavesdrop on – and to report – the values by which the characters and their behaviour are governed. This much emerges on the very opening page of the text. The second paragraph tells us that the universally acknowledged truth is not so much universally acknowledged as "so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families". Universality is, then, a function of the social consensus within a given class, and of a particular gender. As the ensuing dialogue makes clear, Mr Bennet has neither heard the news about the new tenant who has taken Netherfield Park, nor, when he does hear it, does he register its import for the Bennet family with its bevy of marriageable girls. Mrs Bennet is explicit in her aspiration to get one of them married off. Mr Bennet, how-

<sup>3)</sup> JEREMY ADLER, *A Night at the Troubadour*, London 2017, p. 297.

ever, remains resolutely, perhaps deliberately, obtuse. “Is that his design in settling here?” he asks – to the unconcealed irritation of his wife. By the end of the first page of the novel, then, the universal truth has been unmistakably relativized by over-use in the characters’ conversational gambits. The opening sentence invokes “a single man in possession of a good fortune”. The concept of wealth then passes to Mrs Bennet who speaks of Mr Bingley as a “young man of large fortune”, later as a “single man of large fortune”. By the end of a few lines of dialogue Jane Austen has established the quotational mode that indwells in her mastery of free indirect speech.<sup>4)</sup> Society exists, then, as a communality of attitudes, as a set of values and assumptions. The narrative voice is content to allow that interplay of various reflectivities to take its course; there are few instances of judgmental intrusion in Jane Austen’s novels. Judgment is left to the reader.<sup>5)</sup> He or she will decide which of the characters comes closest to living aright in the available world.

My two other examples from the English realistic novel are far removed from the deft understatement of Jane Austen. George Eliot’s ›Middlemarch‹ opens with a universally acknowledged truth if ever there was one:

Who that cares much to know the history of man, and how the mysterious mixture behaves under the varying experiments of Time, has not dwelt, at least briefly, on the life of Saint Theresa, has not smiled with some gentleness at the thought of the little girl walking forth one morning hand-in-hand with her still smaller brother, to go and seek martyrdom in the country of the Moors?

The initial instance of reflectivity in ›Middlemarch‹ is anchored in the portrait of a woman of high spirituality, whose “passionate, ideal nature demanded an epic life”. In earlier cultures, cultures scarcely touched by the pragmatic climate of nineteenth-century provincial England, the ideal type of the Saint Theresa figure provides a yardstick of value. And that measure of human dignity retains its force even into ages and cultures that offer little sustenance to the nobly questing soul. Many subsequent Therasas, the Prelude to the novel continues, have been doomed to “tragic failure, to a life of mistakes, the outpouring of a certain spiritual grandeur ill-matched with the meanness of opportunity.” Such latter-day Therasas find themselves “helped by no coherent faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul”. They are, it seems, martyrs to the small-spirited mediocrity of the world which they are obliged to inhabit. They live by values which are beyond the common indication.

One asks oneself what the function of this grandiose Prelude is for a novel which is resolutely concerned with the modest lives and experiences of nineteenth-century provincial England. The answer, I venture to suggest, has to do with that reflectivity in respect of value, in respect of living aright in the currently available world which is at the heart of English novel realism. For George Eliot the central issue

<sup>4)</sup> ROY PASCAL, *The Dual Voice*, Manchester 1997, pp. 45–60.

<sup>5)</sup> EDWARD NEILL, *The Politics of Jane Austen*, Basingstoke 1999, pp. 66–69.

is ethical and explores the parameters of the morally good life.<sup>6)</sup> It expresses itself in the characters' interactions, negatively in the aridity of Dorothea's marriage to Casaubon, positively in the crucial meeting between Dorothea and Rosamund, in the fulfilment that Dorothea finds in her marriage to Will. She remains an incommensurable presence in *Middlemarch* – “where she [is] spoken of to a younger generation as a fine girl who married a sickly clergyman, old enough to be her father, and in little more than a year after his death gave up her estate to marry his cousin – young enough to have been his son.” In terms of practicality, Dorothea's values have offered her only modest living aright. Yet there is the other dimension of reflectivity that is present in the responses of the reader. And in that framework of significance Saint Theresa becomes an instance of ethical truth. The novel closes with an impassioned justification of Dorothea, one which conjoins sublimity, transcendence on the one hand with modest human decency on the other:

Her finely touched spirit had still its fine issues, though they were not widely visible. [...] the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unheroic acts; and that things are not as ill with you and me as they might have been is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.

The appeal here to the reader, to the ‘you and me’ of our shared humanity is one of the most memorable moments in European realism. The narrative voice holds in focus both the limited, relative values of a particular historical world and the larger values of spiritual arightness, and in the process creates a reflectivity that brings narrator and reader into communion.

My final example from the English tradition is Charles Dickens's ›Bleak House‹. The opening chapter is magnificent in its rhetorical fervour. The governing gesture is that of description, description of the material world. But this is no act of dispassionate constataion. Rather, there is an excess in the entities described, and that excess converts physicality into laceratingly judgmental metaphor.<sup>7)</sup> There is mud, fog, and gas everywhere. All three substances serve to block out the light and, by extension, to blight human being and knowing. The temporal signature is that of the present tense. But many of the sentences lack main verbs. The parataxis is mobilized in the service of judgment, judgment passed on the sheer Manichean horror that disfigures the environs of the city:

Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows: fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollution of a great (and dirty) city. Fog in the Essex marshes, fog in the Kentish heights.

That blighting of all life, energy, and good sense finds its crowning symbolic embodiment in something that is man-made, in an institution – in the High

<sup>6)</sup> PAULINE NESTOR, *George Eliot*, Basingstoke 2002, pp. 130–139.

<sup>7)</sup> LYNN PYKETT, *Charles Dickens*, Basingstoke 2002, pp. 130–133.

Court of Chancery. Its tentacles reach far and wide throughout the land. It is the begetter of “its decaying houses and its blighted lands in every shire”, “its worn-out lunatic in every madhouse”. It perverts justice in that it “gives to monied might the means abundantly of wearying out the right”, it “exhausts finances, patience, courage, hopes; [it] so overthrows the brain and breaks the heart that there is not a honourable man among its practitioners who would not give – who does not often give – the warning, ‘suffer any wrong that can be done you, rather than come here!’” It is difficult to quote brief passages from Dickens. There is a flow, an intensity to the writing, a rhythmic energy that brooks no interruption or dissent. That fervour is triggered by the need to pass judgment in the name of such values as “patience, courage, hope”, which are entirely set at nought in the High Court of Chancery. The denunciation is blistering and becomes, by implication, a direct injunction to the reader – “Suffer any wrong that can be done you, rather than come here!” It is from this hellish world that, late in the novel, Poor Jo, the crossing sweeper, is delivered. Allan Woodcourt, a young surgeon, teaches the dying boy the first few phrases of the Lord’s Prayer. And Jo’s death generates a brief, ferocious paragraph which closes Chapter 47 of the novel. The authorial narrator grieves for so many other victims of the rapacious world that is nineteenth-century London;

Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day.

I referred just now to the “authorial narrator”. But somehow the term sounds too technical, too bloodless and over-theorized. And this is because there is an unmistakable spoken fervour to so much of Dickens’s writing. It was hardly by pure chance that he was fond of – and very successful at – giving readings from his works. The lament for Poor Jo is directed at the serried ranks of English society, starting with the monarchy, then passing to the aristocracy, and then to the clergy. The respectful forms of address acquire a bitterly critical force because those in the higher ranks of society are, by virtue of their rank, removed from ever witnessing the death of a humble crossing-sweeper. One hears this particularly in the modulation of “Right Reverends” to “Wrong Reverends”. Finally the accusation reaches us, ordinary men and women. In a moment of fierce pathos Dickens as it were turns on us, his readers. He is no stranger to sentimentality. Yet one senses that, for him, it is a risk worth taking in the service of a passionately reflective debate about right values, about living aright in a monstrous world.

I want now to pass to two texts written in German – Franz Kafka’s ›Der Process‹ and Robert Musil’s ›Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften‹. Both novels are classics of European modernism, and they display a reflective sophistication that makes concepts and ideas truly novelistic. Yet in the process they also illuminate the workings of social, institutional reality and invite us to reflect on the narrative conventions of literary realism.

Kafka's ›Der Prozess‹ begins with a disturbance of routine. We are told that one Josef K., who turns out to be the protagonist of the novel, is arrested one morning. That arrest is not without its ambiguous aspects. Its initial manifestation seems to be that Frau Grubach's, K.'s landlady's cook, fails to bring him his breakfast; she "kam diesmal nicht". The fracturing of normality is stressed in the very next sentence – "das war noch niemals geschehen". The old woman who lives opposite scrutinizes K. "mit einer an ihr ganz ungewöhnlichen Neugierde". Clearly what has been up to this point usual has now become unusual. K. rings the bell and a man entirely unknown to him appears. He assumes the time-honoured role of the servant – "you rang, Sir?" The situation is menacing in its oddity, but not overtly brutal. The stranger has a conversation with someone "der offenbar knapp hinter der Tür stand". Clearly we the readers are, at this stage of the proceedings, not allowed to know any more than the bemused K. A climate of uncertainty and unclarity prevails. The very opening sentence is couched in the conjectural mode: "Jemand musste Josef K. verleumdet haben", we read. It seems that the narrator knows no more than the baffled protagonist. We are told that Josef K. has done nothing wrong, although that statement, curiously, is couched in the subjunctive mode: "ohne dass er etwas Böses getan hätte". Why not the indicative? Even instances of physical description are fraught with tentativeness. In answer to K.'s ringing of the bell, a man appears whom K. has never seen before (the "noch niemals" repeats the motif of fractured routine). We are given a brief physical description of the stranger:

Er war schlank und doch fest gebaut, er trug ein anliegendes schwarzes Kleid, das, ähnlich den Reiseanzügen, mit verschiedenen Falten, Taschen, Schnallen, Knöpfen und einem Gürtel versehen war und infolgedessen, ohne daß man sich darüber klar wurde, wozu es dienen sollte, besonders praktisch erschien.

This is a brilliant sentence. It is one that, like Jane Austen's universally acknowledged truth, I would have given my eye teeth to have written. It is a sentence that invites us to reflect on so much realistic novel writing which contains description of material reality because that concrete world will tell us a great deal (perhaps all we need to know?) about the characters, about their values and assumptions. Yet here, in Kafka's universe, the physical object in question – a jacket – is clearly profoundly useful yet it is impossible to make out what purpose it serves. In so much of the world Kafka evokes, events occur, characters meet and interact, but we are no longer quite sure what is actually – rather than apparently - going on, just as K. cannot know "wer der Mann eigentlich war". Just as K. is disorientated by the interruptions of his routine life, so we too, as readers of realistic fiction (which is still the staple diet of most novel writing nowadays), are disorientated by the disturbances that fracture our sense of reassuring narrative intelligibility.<sup>8)</sup> We desperately look for meaning in Kafka's texts, but what we emerge with is not

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<sup>8)</sup> See THEO ELM, *Der Prozess*, in: HARTMUT BINDER (ed), *Kafka Handbuch*, Stuttgart 1979, pp. 430–432.

reliable causality, not negotiable meaning. Rather, we find ourselves reflecting on the assumptions we normally make as readers of fiction. But the values we bring to bear on our reading process no longer hold sway. We are unsure how to live aright in an unintelligible world. Our reflectivity does not banish the sense of disturbance; it compounds it.

My final example comes from the opening of Robert Musil's ›Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften‹. It is a supreme exercise in intertextual irony as regards the governing rhetorical gestures of realistic fiction. Musil supplies chapter headings very much in the spirit of many eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century novels. In this instance we read: "Woraus bemerkenswerter Weise nichts hervorgeht". We note the paradox to the effect that it is noteworthy that nothing emerges from this chapter. Perhaps we are (as it were) being offered a gloss on Barthes's "reality effect"<sup>9)</sup> – that convention of realistic writing that rejoices in the sheer redundancy of physical description in the novel (frequently in the opening pages of a novel – one might think of the beginning of Balzac's ›Le Pere Goriot‹). According to Barthes, the reality effect amounts to an acknowledgment of physical thereness for its own sake. Musil's chapter heading, in the spirit of an old-fashioned novel, brings us then surprisingly close to modern theory. The interplay between various novel cultures is sustained in the first paragraph of the main text. It ends: "Mit einem Wort, das das Tatsächliche recht gut bezeichnet, wenn auch etwas altmodisch ist: es war ein schöner Augusttag des Jahres 1913." What precedes this sentence is a technical description of the weather in scientific meteorological detail. As readers we can take our pick as to which description most effectively sets the scene.

That scene-setting, under various narrative aspects,<sup>10)</sup> continues in the next paragraph. We are told about the rhythms and sounds of traffic in Vienna. The narrator suggests to us that cities are to be recognized by their patterns of human and vehicular movement, and that these rhythms are much more what defines the characters of any given city than is its name. We are then offered reflections on what passes for accurate notation of the relationships between human beings and the world around them. We content ourselves with the simple constation that a nose is red; we never ask "welches besondere Rot sie habe, obgleich sich das durch die Wellenlänge auf Mikromillimeter genau ausdrücken ließe." In our daily lives, as in our reading of realistic novels, we put up with vagueness and approximation, it seems. And this blurring extends even to human identity. We are introduced to two characters who will figure prominently in the novel. But this meeting between characters and readers is a very curious one. We are told that in their clothing and general behaviour these two figures belong to the upper echelons of society; they "trugen die Anfangsbuchstaben ihrer Namen bedeutsam auf ihre Wäsche gestickt". As in the Kafka passage just quoted, we find ourselves moving within the narrative

<sup>9)</sup> ROLAND BARTHES, *L'Effet de réel*, in: *Communications* 11 (1968), pp. 84–89.

<sup>10)</sup> See HELMUT ARNTZEN, *Musil-Kommentar zum Roman ›Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften‹*, Munich 1982, pp. 76–92.



convention of the realistic novel: the externals tell us a great deal about the inner life of the characters. Immediately the narrator spells out the interpretative implications: “in der feinen Unterwäsche ihres Bewusstseins wussten sie, wer sie seien”. They are certain of their own identities, of their place in the world. But who are they? The narrator’s answer is ironic in the extreme: “Angenommen, sie würden Arnheim und Ermelinda Tuzzi heißen, was aber nicht stimmt, denn Frau Tuzzi befand sich im August in der Begleitung ihres Gatten in Bad Aussee und Dr Arnheim noch in Konstantinopel.” Musil’s invoking of the realistic convention is masterly. At one level we are reminded that any novel opening entails a kind of conjecture, a thought experiment. “Let us assume that . . .” is the governing rhetorical gesture. But suppose the gesture is wide of the mark. But which mark? It seems that, for the purposes of Musil’s novel, there are two characters, and they are given their civic titles – Frau Tuzzi and Dr Arnheim. But they are not, at this particular time of year, in Vienna. They exist as much as any characters do in fiction – but not as originally introduced to us. We find ourselves reflecting on the notations of character and of place in novels. In Kafka’s ›Der Process‹ we learn that the main character is called Josef K. But this seems a shade inadequate, not much to go on by traditional criteria. Does the protagonist of this novel have a merely bureaucratic existence, designated by the initial of his surname? We know that the author is Franz Kafka. His name contains the letter ‘k’ twice. Is some game of autobiographical hide-and-seek being played with us? The letter ‘k’ is followed by the vowel ‘a’ twice. Musil’s fictional version of Austria-Hungary is named ‘Kakanien’, deriving both from the initials k and k, signifying imperial and royal and from the child’s word for excrement. Is Musil’s world, then, some form of Kafka-land? Novels can play havoc with our readerly interest in, and need for, reality inside and outside the narrative text.

I want to come swiftly to a conclusion. I have been trying to highlight the presence of reflectivity in the broadly realistic temper of the nineteenth-century English novel and the presence of realistic issues and stylistics in the high self-consciousness of the modernist novel in German. These arguments, I am very much aware, have traversed well-known territory, although I hope not wearisomely so. I have looked briefly at five novels that all, in their different but perhaps not unrelated ways, are of the very first rank. They are of the very highest literary quality. They engage us as readers, they bring us into dialogue with the worded text. They initiate that complex and gradual process that is the hermeneutic circle which develops as we move back and forth between text and context, between individual sentences or paragraphs and the gradually emerging nexus of signification that is the work as a whole – which then in its turn re-modifies the individual items of the text. To such modes of dialogic, gradual, cumulative understanding, which are poles apart from our contemporary culture of ‘click here’, of the instant downloading of information, Rüdiger Görner has devoted a career of the highest distinction. And we are all immeasurably in his debt.