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February 1986

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The Apocalyptic Vision: A Thematic Exploration of Postwar German Literature

Alan Frank Keele/Madrid: Jose Porrina Turanzas, S. S. (Studia Humanitatis), 1983. Pp. vii+130.

Alan Frank Keele sets out to identify an “apocalyptic vision” of German society in postwar German literature and to describe the literary figures who see it and spread their warnings about it. The vision consists of runaway technology, evil toys, aborted children, and “de-humanized robot/citizens” (p. 125). Those who see and seek to share this vision are the physically and psychologically walking wounded, refugees from a war-torn world, who reject the values of postwar society.

Before examining the author’s argument and evidence, it is important to point out two serious terminological weaknesses. Whereas the subtitle promises an exploration of “postwar German literature,” the book discusses exclusively *West* German literature, primarily of the late 1940s, the 1950s, and the early 1960s. The enormous literary production of writers in the German Democratic Republic, Austria, and Switzerland is never mentioned. The author uses the term “German literature” as though it ceased at the accidental boundaries of the Federal Republic.

The term “postwar” is admittedly problematic, for it is often used both for the immediate postwar period and for the entire span from 1945 to the present. Keele does not define how he wants to use this term, and, although his argument is best suited to the period from 1945 to about 1960, he draws on literary examples from as late as 1969 and on social evidence from the 1970s. A clear definition would have been welcome.

The book is divided into two sections, the first and more successful of which examines two characteristics of the postwar “seer”—eyeglasses that allow the seer to see as others do not and an emblematic limp that marks the seer as having survived a terrible struggle, in this case, of course, World War II. The author sees the immediate source of both features in Beckmann, the protagonist of Wolfgang Borchert’s *Draussen vor der Tür* (1947). The motif of the eyeglasses, which Keele discusses in his first chapter, recurs frequently in such characters as Berthold Klaff in Martin Walser’s *Ehen in Phillipsburg* (1957), Alfred Schrella in Heinrich Böll’s *Billiard um halb Zehn* (1959), and Eduard Amsel in Günter Grass’s *Hundejahre* (1963), characters who see moral bankruptcy behind the facade of the economic miracle in West Germany. The figure of Amsel is examined in depth as Keele ingeniously ties the fate of Amsel’s *Erkenntnisbrillen*—that is, eyeglasses that allow German youth to recognize the crimes of their parents—to attempts in 1962 to

suppress Grass's *Katz und Maus* and to the scandal of the *Spiegel* suppression of the same year. The author also provides a brief but useful discussion of etymological and literary sources of crystal gazing, spectacles, and mirrors.

In the second chapter Keele discusses the emblematic limp. He believes that Beckmann, Klaff, Schrella, and Amsel fit into a pattern of literary figures described by Peter Hays in *The Limping Hero* and by Robert Graves in his discussion of the sacred king in *The White Goddess*. The postwar seers have been touched by combat, have suffered a laming wound, and have emerged with the powers of a prophet. Keele also discusses Anton Schmitz, the protagonist of Paul Schallück's *Don Quichotte in Köln*. In Schmitz's visions and in his efforts to influence the young, Keele sees "the archetypal postwar limping prophet par excellence . . ." (p. 41).

The second part of the book, "The Apocalyptic View of Certain Contemporary Phenomena," attempts to identify three recurrent themes—militaristic toys and games, technology, and the mechanization of humanity, and abortion—as components in the visions of the seers that the author has identified. The discussions of these phenomena are of uneven quality. The first, on toys and games, begins well with a discussion of the function of military toys in texts by Schallück, Walser, and Grass and of violent games in novels by Böll and Grass. However, the author then undertakes an examination of the relationship between sports and violence that is unnecessarily lengthy (the thirty-seven pages of this chapter are way out of proportion to the thirteen and eighteen pages of the other two chapters in this section) and that seems to get lost in the world of North American football and hockey. The author has an important point to make about how normal rules of conduct are suspended both in sport and in war, but his elegant juxtaposition of a horrifying hockey incident with one of Wolfgang Borchert's "Lesebuchgeschichten" (p. 41) makes this relationship clear and renders much of the remainder of his discussion superfluous.

The fourth chapter examines technology, especially the automobile, and its potential to dehumanize those who become too closely associated with it. Keele looks back to earlier literary sources of technology phobia and discusses Ernst Toller's *Masse Mensch* (1919) and Bertolt Brecht's *Mann ist Mann* (1926) as prewar examples of literary visions of the mechanization of humanity. Unfortunately, he does not examine his postwar texts very thoroughly here, and, with the exception of an earlier interpretation of the role of the automobile in Schallück's *Don Quichotte*, the reader is left more with the author's assertion of the importance of this theme to the apocalyptic vision than with a clear illustration of it.

The fifth chapter, on abortion, is the least satisfying. Keele discusses three texts at length, Schallück's *Wenn man aufhören könnte zu lügen* (1951), Walser's *Ehen in Phillipsburg*, and Böll's *Ansichten eines Clowns* (1963). The author claims that in these works abortion is portrayed as being "the lowest common denominator and at the same time the ne plus ultra of killing; the murder of an embryo is evil in its most embryonic form" (p. 119). The importance of the apocalyptic vision is to "recognize and shun evil in all its forms. One of these forms is abortion" (p. 110). An examination of the texts discussed suggests that the central role in the apocalyptic vision assigned to abortion has more to do with the convictions of the author than with the postwar literature under consideration.

The abortion in Schallück's novel is an abortion prevented. Thomas Abbt, the protagonist, prevents his lover, Marion, from having an abortion, mistakenly believing the child to be his own. Thus rescued, Marion finds herself in a completely untenable social and economic situation and is driven to suicide. The evil of abortion is not as clear or as absolute in this novel as Keele would have it.

In *Ansichten eines Clowns* Hans Schnier speaks often of Marie's two miscarriages. While the description of the second of these suggests the possibility that it was an abortion, Keele glosses over the studied ambiguity of Böll's text and sees the loss of Schnier's child as "the decision of this postwar Virgin Mary . . . to crucify grotesquely the divine child in utero . . ." (p. 118).

Walser's text contains the only clear portrayal of an abortion. It describes in satirical detail the grotesque efforts of an incompetent quack to whom a young couple is driven by the illegality of abortion. Keele speaks, incredibly, of the "sheer realism" of this scene and asserts that "although related matters such as the abortion's illegality do enter in, the loathsome reality of the process of abortion itself overshadows all tangential arguments and questions, surely arousing subliminal disgust in all but the most perverse" (p. 115). The passage in question is certainly disgusting, but the issue of illegality is hardly tangential, and the disgust does not necessarily derive from the "loathsome reality of the process of abortion itself."

Keele ends his discussion of these texts with the following two rhetorical questions: "Or has the foregoing been a complete misinterpretation of these writings? Has it forced them into a prejudicial moralizing mold?" (p. 121). That one has little difficulty answering these questions affirmatively very much weakens the author's summation of the apocalyptic vision.

There is one further problem that should be mentioned. Even if one accepts the undefined limits of Keele's thematic exploration to the immediate postwar period in West Germany, one must question the absence of any mention of Wolfgang Koeppen or Arno Schmidt. Equally questionable is the overwhelming presence of Paul Schallück (three of whose novels are treated at length in this brief book), a writer lacking the stature of Grass, Böll, and Walser—or indeed of Koeppen and Schmidt. Although the author makes an excellent case for the presence of the bespectacled limping seer in a number of works of postwar German literature, his concentration on a relatively unrepresentative novelist, the fuzziness of his definitions, and the uneven quality of the second part of his work spoil a promising and provocative beginning. The book ultimately disappoints.

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