

German Literature: a Very Short Introduction, Nicholas Boyle

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Additional topic to be included in the German version:

(ii) *The Literature of Austria and the Hapsburg Empire*

Austria was different. First of all it was an empire, not a nation, nor a federation aspiring to nationhood: from 1526, long before it bore the name of empire, the union of Austria, Bohemia and Hungary was imperial in character. Unlike Germany, it was multicultural, multilingual, and it had a single centre. No city in Germany, before 1871, had the status of unchallenged capital enjoyed by Vienna, the residence of a monarch who was, at times, the most powerful in Europe. On the one hand, therefore, cultural life was marked by the pre-eminence of a single metropolis as nowhere else in the German-speaking world. On the other, the development of a German-language literature could not have the same nation-building significance that it had in the northern, monoglot, German lands. Second, the Hapsburg territories were Catholic, and in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries increasingly so as absolute monarchs sought to impose uniformity on Silesia, Bohemia and Hungary. This meant that a major reason for cultivating the German language – that it was the language of Luther and his reform – was absent, and that a great poet such as Catharina Regina von Greiffenberg (1633-1694), writing the most elaborate and linguistically imaginative sonnets of her time within the Lutheran tradition of mysticism, had to find refuge in Germany, in Nuremberg. It also meant that Latin remained much longer, and more firmly, the language of school and university (and so of school and university drama) than in the North. And since the personnel and administration of Church and State were largely distinct, and Catholicism remained

relatively impervious to deist influences (though not to all forms of the Enlightenment), Austria was in the eighteenth century unaffected by the peculiar confluence of factors which led Protestant Germany to develop a substitute, secular religion of Art and 'Bildung' for an officialdom caught up in a crisis of faith. The world however is indebted to Joseph II's attempts to emulate his northern neighbours and to counter the growing power of Prussia, since his encouragement of secular and vernacular culture, and specifically, in the 1780s, of German-language opera, gave us Mozart's *Seraglio* (1782) and Emanuel Schikaneder's (1751-1812) libretto for *The Magic Flute*, (*Die Zauberflöte*, 1791). The Viennese popular theatres themselves, entertaining not the court but the urban population, and drawing on Spanish and Italian traditions both of religious drama and *commedia dell'arte*, had no parallel in the German North, and they contributed decisively to the rise of a distinctive Austrian literature.

Two great historical shocks gave Austria a German-language literature of its own, and two further shocks destroyed it. The first shock was administered by Napoleon. In response to the Napoleonic threat, Francis II took on the title of Francis, Emperor of Austria, in 1804, and in 1806 the Holy Roman Empire ended altogether. At the time therefore when Austria's political identity was becoming fully distinct from that of Germany, the literature of the Protestant states was at the peak of its prestige in the German-speaking world. Franz Grillparzer (1791-1872) was given the title of Imperial court dramatist in 1818 as a result of the success of his five-act blank-verse drama *Sappho*, about the incompatibility of 'Art' and 'Life', on the assumption that he could outdo Weimar in its own genre. (In the event, though, he made his

career in the Imperial civil service) The authority of the great achievements of secularized Protestantism, of Goethe and Schiller, the Romantics and the philosophers, was, inevitably, always present in Grillparzer's mind. But his situation and concerns were very different. In the first half of his life, until in 1838 an unsuccessful comedy led him to withdraw his plays, he was writing for performance, not to be read, and for a specific theatre. All his plays, tragic, historical, or comic, make more use of costume, gesture and visual and stage effects, to achieve thematic and symbolic unity, than was normal in the more abstract drama of the North. His fairy tale play, *A Dream is Life* (*Der Traum ein Leben*, 1834) was designed to recycle some of the props of *The Magic Flute*. It was also, of course, based on Calderón. Spanish, Hungarian, and Czech themes and sources figured prominently in most of Grillparzer's work, not fortuitously, but because the survival and coherence of a Hapsburg political and cultural tradition, centred on Austria, mattered seriously to him. Not that his outlook was provincial, or that he wanted to curry favour with the court; rather, his deep, if fragile, Catholicism, committed him to a belief in the historical embodiment of God's purpose in particular institutions. It also gave his dramas a moral structure totally at odds with that of the Protestant dramas which came out of Weimar and its succession. Grillparzer's plays do not culminate in a moment of aesthetic or ethical transcendence, but in the tragic outcome, or occasionally the redemption, of moral error. He concentrates on analysing not the motives of decisions but their consequences: 'fate' or 'necessity', for him, leads not towards an act but away from it. In his trilogy *The Golden Fleece* (*Das goldene Vlies*, 1821) the story of Jason and the Argonauts is told only as a prelude to a cruelly precise dissection of the subsequent mixed marriage which the self-obsessed Jason has forced on Medea, and which is doomed by the snobbery of Greek racism. (The

picture of Greece could not be further from Winckelmann.) Grillparzer's greatest play, written in retirement, though still with the needs of the theatre in view, *Fraternal Strife in the House of Hapsburg* (*Ein Bruderzwist in Habsburg*, 1848, published 1872) shows the complex of individual and collective moral failings that are punished by the outbreak of the Thirty Years' War. His one significant piece of narrative prose, the story *The Poor Fiddler* (*Der arme Spielmann*, 1847) transforms his own self-doubt into a meditation on the relation between faith and works, art and morality: the beauty of the fiddler's playing is known only by him, but his self-sacrificing death makes his true character, if there is such a thing, plain to the narrator.

The legacy of Schikaneder on which Grillparzer drew was more directly continued by two theatrical geniuses. Ferdinand Raimund (1790-1836) developed the fairy-tale play with magical effects towards moral and social criticism but from the early 1830s was overshadowed by the inexhaustible talent of Johann Nestroy (1801-1862). Nestroy began in opera, making his debut as Sarastro in *The Magic Flute*, soon becoming a member and director of the theatre Schikaneder founded, and moving on from the fairy-play to topical satirical farces in which he sang and acted as the principal figure: 'every word a joke', said a contemporary. He took advantage of the brief abolition of censorship during the 1848 revolution to venture into political satire (*Freedom in Much Snoring* [*Freiheit in Krähwinkel*]) and enjoyed himself hugely at the expense of the immigrant Hebbel's grandiloquent characters in *Judith and Holofernes* (1849). In the 1850s he had a similar success with parodies of

Wagner and his introduction of Offenbach to the Vienna stage prepared the way for the operettas of Johann Strauss.

Nestroy's satirical sniping at the ironies of German literature was an oblique admission of its power and influence. Even more than Grillparzer, Adalbert Stifter (1805-1868) had to struggle with the magnetic force of the German example, trying to bend it to a different purpose. Born into a poor family in a village in the Bohemian Forest, Stifter owed his education to Benedictine monks. Gifted both as a painter and a writer, principally of long short stories (often wrongly categorized as 'Novellen'), of which his finest single collection was *Wayside Gems (Bunte Steine, 1853)*, he found a more secure living as a reforming inspector of schools, helping to found a 'Realschule' – a modern school teaching vocational subjects – in Linz. 'Bildung' for Stifter therefore meant not 'culture' but 'education', not an individual process of self-cultivation, but collective teaching and learning. A second and even more important difference from the ideology of Weimar lay in his concept of Nature. While 'Nature' in German 'classical' and Romantic literature still had strongly theological overtones, even if the theology was pantheist, Stifter lived in the age of Ludwig Büchner and Darwin. Most of his stories, set in the rural Austria and Bohemia that he knew best, deal with the relation between Nature and human morality and seem on the surface to suggest a Catholic conception of natural law: the rules of moral behaviour, and even of religious observance, simply conform us to what in the end we know is best for us and what fundamentally it is in our nature to want. But, read more closely, the stories are far more disturbing: morality in them is not, as in the Kantian tradition, a matter of the individual conscience; it is a matter of the learned and traditional behaviour of

whole communities. And the importance of that behaviour for the communities is that by it alone they survive. The penalty for breaching human moral solidarity in Stifter's stories is extinction: without it communities fall apart and individuals die. The Nature that he represents as the endless forest, the empty mountain ranges, the desolate steppes of Hungary, is unimaginably vast and indifferent to humankind – across that vastness are stretched the frail systems of communication by which human beings come to each other's help: smoke-signals, flags, telescopes; the place-names that give human meaning to silent hills and rocks and trees; the traditions handed down from one generation to the next. To the theological question – are the commandments to goodness God-given, or are they simply a mechanism for survival? – Stifter, properly, and like Grillparzer in *The Poor Fiddler*, returns no clear answer. Many stories, however, end with an indication that the tradition they have chronicled or the meaning they have created is now a thing of the past: the position of the reader, it is implied, is seriously vulnerable. That threat of vulnerability is present on every page of one of the strangest books of the nineteenth century, Stifter's novel *Indian Summer (Der Nachsommer, 1857)*: two volumes in which almost nothing happens, but the hero is gradually inducted into a life of the ritualistic contemplation and preservation of beauty. But the beauty and order, which at times is explicitly referred to its Goethean model, is achieved against the background of a permanent but unvoiced threat of the loss of meaning and control. The device is terrifying on the small scale, in the story *Mountain Crystal (Bergkristall)* in *Wayside Gems*, but expanded to the length of a novel it is unconvincing.

Stifter died (of cirrhosis of the liver, though the myth of suicide continues to circulate) as Austria suffered its second great shock. Military defeat by Prussia and the expulsion of the Hapsburg interest from Germany and Venice forced a reappraisal of the entire Imperial structure. From 1867 the dual monarchy of Austria-Hungary was established, giving a large measure of independence to the kingdom of Hungary, ruled from Budapest, while the Austrian empire remained centred on Vienna, but acquired a parliamentary system in which the interests of the various nationalities were kept in balance for a while. Within this large free-trade area, with extensive primary resources, economic progress was rapid, despite the crash of 1873, and Vienna came to house a large and wealthy bourgeoisie, in which Jewish industrialists and bankers were prominent, and which was willing to act as a patron of the arts: in the last quarter of the century Vienna was the city of Strauss and Brahms, of Bruckner and Mahler, of the *art nouveau* movement of Secession and of Gustav Klimt, the painter of gold and the female body. The literary culture of this class could also unfold freely since it was not faced with a hostile official and academic culture, jealously guarding its 'classical' past, as in Germany it would have been. Since, however, it shared the language it did have to decide on its relation to the German tradition as a whole, and especially to its long-standing ideology of autonomous 'Art'. For Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874-1929), the only child of a Catholic but partly Jewish banking family, and a poetic talent as precocious as Keats or Rimbaud, the relation between 'Art' and 'Life', and specifically morality, was a central concern throughout his early years. It was the issue that defined him as Austrian rather than German and ultimately led to his breach with Stefan George, whom he first met when he was 17 and had just published a first little poetic drama ('he can kill without touching', he wrote in a sonnet afterwards). Hofmannsthal's early verse, luscious,

symbolist, and formally perfect, might seem to have surrendered entirely to George's aestheticism:

Es läuft der Frühlingswind

Durch kahle Alleen,

Seltsame Dinge sind

In seinem Wehn [...]

Er schüttelte nieder

Akazienblüten

Und kühlte die Glieder

Die atmend glühten

The spring wind rushes down bare avenues, strange things are in its blowing [...] It shook down acacia blossoms and cooled the limbs that breathed and glowed.

(‘Early Spring’ [‘Vorfrühling’] 1892)

But at the same time he was writing more short plays in which those who dedicate their lives to art have to meet the reality of time and death. Catholicism meant liturgy to George, but it meant life to Hofmannsthal, and a sense of the responsibility that comes from belonging to the human race, however privileged one's own existence, speaks through other great poems of his:

Und mein Teil ist mehr als dieses Lebens

Schlanke Flamme oder schmale Leier.

And my part is more than this life's slender flame or narrow lyre.

(‘Some, to be sure...’ [‘Manche freilich...’] 1895)

‘Art’ was a concept that encapsulated the relation of German literary intellectuals such as George to their nation and state. In Austria therefore it was a foreign import. The equivalent concept for an Austrian was ‘language’, and this became the focus of Hofmannsthal’s thought about the relation of Art and Life. Language was a central problem for Austrian literature because of the linguistic multiplicity of the Austrian monarchy (to say nothing of Hungary) – 10 million German speakers, 6 1/2 million Czechs, 5 million Poles – and because of the commonalty with Germany: not only were languages different, even the same language shared by different communities could be the vehicle of meanings that were not shared. Viennese intellectuals of the 1890s had a sharply critical awareness that language was not just the medium in which a writer could construct self-sufficient beauty but was a link between literature and all human affairs, and an instrument for influencing the way people think. Arthur Schnitzler, (1862-1931), a dramatist and prose-writer, and early a friend of Hofmannsthal’s, made the first use of the stream-of-consciousness technique in German, in his short story *Leutnant Gustl* (1901), to reveal the string of clichés that made up what passed for the mind of a bumptious young officer. In 1899 the satirist and cabaret artist Karl Kraus (1874-1936) founded his journal *The Torch (Die Fackel)*, dedicated to exposing the abuse of words by journalists and politicians, and among his warmest admirers was the future linguistic philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) from one of Vienna’s richest families. (From 1903-6 Wittgenstein was educated in the Realschule in Linz – the school begun by Stifter – at

the same time as one of the century's greatest abusers of words, Adolf Hitler.) If the critique of language suggested that words express the experience not so much of an individual self as of a linguistic community, another, related, development in Vienna at this time questioned the very idea of an individual self, an idea essential both to German Lutheranism and to the Idealist and aesthetic philosophy that had proceeded out of it. Psychoanalysis, as developed by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), used language – extended monologues of the patients, prompted by the therapist – to reveal the forgotten, and mainly sexual, feelings and events that had made them what they thought they were. In Freud's theory the conscious self was simply a precarious and shifting balance between unconscious forces. In 1902 Hofmannsthal drew a line under all he had written so far with an essay, a fictitious letter from Lord Chandos to Francis Bacon explaining why he is abandoning literature. Words, Chandos says, have for him become completely detached from things: the infinite meaning that he can still occasionally glimpse in the most ordinary objects, such as a watering can or a dog in the sun, is quite inexpressible in the words that once seemed to him to coincide with it completely and he has become incapable of speaking or thinking coherently. Not that Hofmannsthal intended to draw the same conclusion as Chandos from this simultaneous collapse of the ordering powers of language and the individual self. For him the letter marked only the abandonment of the particular conception of Art that generated its conflict with the interest of Life. Hofmannsthal had taken his decision and was committing himself now to a form of literature that was essentially public and put itself from the beginning at the service of others: 'the way to the social as the way to the higher self', he noted. He turned to full-length drama, which he wished in the tradition of Grillparzer to make generally accessible, and in the series of operas

that from 1906 he wrote in collaboration with Richard Strauss (e.g. *Der Rosenkavalier*, 1911) he may be said to have succeeded.

In the first decade of the twentieth century the awareness of a gathering crisis of personal identity, beneath the more obviously threatening crisis in the economic and political spheres, was common to the bourgeoisie of both Germany and Austria. To Wedekind's dramatizations of depersonalizing sex corresponded Schnitzler's analyses of the roles of sexuality and death in constructing personality, and indeed society (*Dalliance* [*Liebelei*], 1895; *La Ronde* [*Reigen*] 1896-7), for which he was commended by Freud. In Austria, however, the sense of a further crisis in the relation between language and its objects compounded the challenge for poetry. A native of Prague, where German-speakers could not avoid the self-consciousness either of the élite or of the parvenu, Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) struggled to find his identity in and through the word. The son of a railway official and a mother who felt that she had married beneath herself and really belonged in the court circles of Vienna, he was strikingly successful throughout his life in finding aristocratic patrons willing to have him as a house guest and, conducting his marriage at long distance, led a wandering life like Nietzsche and George. At first, with extreme facility, he produced a flood of inferior and pretentious verse but by about 1903 he had by sheer diligence worked himself to a point where he could formulate his personal vocation as a serious response to the challenge of the age: to 'say' ('sagen'), as he liked to put it, what 'is'. The world that was beyond human words and feelings had, in its very wordlessness and inarticulacy, to be brought into poetry. By being made word and feeling the world came to 'be', and the poet's work was therefore literally God's – the theme of Rilke's first (almost) mature collection, *The Book of Hours* (*Das Stunden-Buch*, 1905). Rather than be diverted by the difficulty of the task into treating literature as a

form of sociability, as Hofmannsthal had been, Rilke intended to press on with the solitary confrontation with things in language.

Sind wir vielleicht *hier*, um zu sagen: Haus,

Brücke, Brunnen, Tor, Krug, Obstbaum, Fenster, - [...]?

Are we perhaps *here* in order to say: house, bridge, fountain, gate, jug,
fruit-tree, window [...]?

(*Duino Elegies*, 9)

Much of Rilke's programme – the identification of self and world and the significance of its necessary counterpart, the idea of 'one's own death'; the sense that modern industrial society drains 'being' out of things; the Cézanne-like cult of individual, simple objects – was taken over into philosophy by Heidegger. Its poetic fruits came in the two volumes of *New Poems* (*Neue Gedichte*, 1907-8) which combine an intense gaze at animals, people (historical and unnamed), paintings, sculptures, and momentary situations, with slightly exhibitionist turns of phrase and rhyme, to create a gallery of unique experiences that are at once existential and linguistic. Rilke however again moved on, and in 1911 at Duino Castle, near Trieste, began to wrestle directly with his fundamental themes of being, saying, and death in a cycle of ten long poems. A remarkable range of tones – from the satirical through the meditative to the ecstatic – and an even greater range of imagery – from the natural and the urban through Zen-like paradoxicality to a lucid abstraction worthy of Dante's *Paradise* – are held together by an argument that is both thought and lived, and by a flexible metre loosely modelled on the elegies of Goethe and Hölderlin. The *Duino Elegies* (*Duineser Elegien*) took over ten years to complete but when the last were written in

February 1922 they were accompanied by an entire new cycle of perfect poems, written at astonishing speed, *Sonnets to Orpheus* (*Sonette an Orpheus*). Since their publication in 1923 the elegies and sonnets have not ceased to be recognized as among the most important poetic achievements of the twentieth century. Without the *Elegies* it is possible that we would not have T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*.

The war which interrupted Rilke's work on his masterpiece – he did some war service in the military records office in Vienna – brought the poetry of Georg Trakl (1887-1914) to a tragic culmination. Trakl, a Salzburg Protestant and a trained pharmacist, had an unstable temperament and a history of drug-taking, but his ethereally synaesthetic, faintly archaic poems, which drew extensively on Hölderlin, attracted the admiration of Karl Kraus and financial support from Wittgenstein. The two collections published in his lifetime are full of a sense of living in the end times, expressed sometimes in consolingly Eucharistic images but more often in moods of foreboding and the fear that 'the golden image of man may be swallowed up by the icy waves of eternity'. In 1914 he was posted as a medical orderly to the Galician front and, deranged by the appalling aftermath of the battle of Grodek, he committed suicide a few weeks later. His last work, 17 lines, with the title *Grodek*, has been called 'the greatest German war poem' and it has the horror and the grandeur of a (possibly Christian) *Götterdämmerung*. Its last lines have been read as containing a hint of hope – as is proper in an apocalypse – but their foreground meaning is surely that this is a generation with no posterity:

Die heiße Flamme des Geistes nährt heute ein gewaltiger Schmerz,

Die ungeborenen Enkel.

The hot flame of the spirit is fed today by a terrible pain, the unborn grandchildren.

The dual monarchy of Austria-Hungary gave birth in 1918 only to a posterity of quarrelsome, nationalistic, and economically scarcely viable statelets soon to be reabsorbed into the German and then the Soviet Empire. Austria itself was reduced by the Versailles settlement to a German-speaking rump, its bourgeoisie obliterated by an inflation as severe as the German. Literature battled on for a while. Hofmannsthal, while continuing his collaboration with Strauss, wrote two great stage-plays: the comedy *A Difficult Man* (*Der Schwierige*, 1921) and the 'supra-historical' tragedy *The Tower* (*Der Turm*, 1925-8) which in its final version is a bleak acknowledgement that history knows no redemptions. Asked what an Austrian writer should now do, he answered 'Die!', and a stroke carried him off two days after the suicide of his son. Karl Kraus vented his wrath against the folly of the World War, which he had consistently opposed, in a mammoth satirical drama *The Last Days of Mankind* (*Die letzten Tage der Menschheit*, 1922) and continued *The Torch* until he died in 1936. However, a dense and withering denunciation of the German Nazis, composed mainly of direct and indirect quotations from their own utterances, was left unpublished for fear of reprisals against his fellow-Jews (*The Third Walpurgis Night*, [*Die dritte Walpurgisnacht*], 1933, published 1952). Wittgenstein settled in England as, after Hitler's unification of Austria and Germany, did Freud and the novelist and autobiographer Elias Canetti (1905-1994), later a Nobel prizewinner. The Expressionist Franz Werfel (1890-1945), also Jewish, escaped to America where he

wrote *The Song of Bernadette* (*Das Lied von Bernadette*, 1941) in gratitude for the help he had received from nuns in Lourdes.

Only after 1925 did it become clear to the world that in provincial Prague, by then the capital of the implausible state of Czechoslovakia, novels had been written that were set to become the best-known works in German-language literature. Their author, Franz Kafka (1883-1924), came from the Jewish minority within the same German-speaking community – itself a minority – in which Rilke originated. But whereas Rilke fled Prague to escape the stifling embrace of his mother, Kafka stayed there, nailed down by the overwhelming authority of his father. What both had in common was the all-determining experience of being outside. Rilke needed to be outside, even outside home and family, in order to write, and experienced his writing as a way of making himself the outside of a world that was interior to him ('nowhere shall world be but inside' he wrote in the *Seventh Duino Elegy*). For Kafka being outside was also the condition, and to a great extent the theme, of his writing, but he experienced it as a terrible fate, an arbitrary and inexplicable exclusion from family, happiness, and salvation. Rilke was content to be excluded and to drift from hotel to castle to tumbledown mansion in Provence, in order to maintain his ability to 'say' the world, and felt threatened only by anything that tried to draw him in, such as the modern economy, his family, and the need to earn a living. Kafka suffered an agonizing conflict between his need to write and his need to be included in the world of economic achievement and reproductive success represented by his father, and he destroyed his health by living two lives at once, working during the day in a government insurance office, writing during the night, and sleeping only briefly in the afternoons. Rilke, thanks to his talent and the beneficence of others, lived the life of the obsolescent bourgeois, Kafka, by necessity, lived the life of the modern

proletarian, the employee. The central figures of all Kafka's novels, and many of his stories, are in paid employment, a striking contrast with most of his predecessors in German and Austrian literature, and one reason why his books seem to speak so directly of modern conditions and have given us the word 'kafkaesque'. For all of us who are working individuals in the era of globalization, the satisfactions we work to obtain are, at least partly, withheld from us by the system which enables us to work and which it is intrinsically impossible for any one individual to comprehend. Kafka met with varying success in his attempts, whether realistic or allegorical, to embody, in a persuasive representation of modern life, his own sense of inadequacy to an incomprehensible but inescapable demand. In his first novel *Missing Person (Der Verschollene)*, written 1911, published 1927, originally known as *America*) Karl Rossmann's struggle to find a footing as an immigrant in America is frustrated mainly by scrupulously plotted misunderstandings reminiscent of farce, but there are occasional irrational interventions, among them the travelling circus in which he at last finds a home, a society in which every individual talent automatically has its niche. Dreamlike, or nightmarish, irrationality is the prevailing atmosphere in *The Trial (Der Prozeß)*, 1914, published 1925): it does not irrupt but is the permanent accompaniment to Josef K.'s precisely pictured life as a bank executive in (presumably) Prague, the buildings, the furniture, the clothes, the streets, the daily and weekly timetable of office hours. But the premise of the novel is that no link is to be shown between this life and Josef K.'s arraignment, investigation, and eventual execution, by a jurisdiction he can never pin down, on a charge that is never revealed. The sense that we are trapped in his mind is reinforced by a narrative logic that permits a door on a staircase in the bank to open on to a torture chamber, and by the insistent suggestion of some link between Josef K.'s persecution and his philandering,

but it also limits the applicability of his parable (if that is what it is). We can detect something of the post-war context in which *The Castle* was written (*Das Schloß*, 1922, published 1926) in a shift of focus which makes the work of the principal character, K., the source of the frustration and perplexity, rather than some unnamed transgression. As a surveyor he brings a promise of connection with the wider and modern world to the near-feudal conditions of the village the castle dominates, probably based on the village in Southern Bohemia where Kafka's grandfather had been a butcher. (Stifter used a surveyor for a similar purpose in his story *Limestone* [*Kalkstein*].) But K.'s struggle for authentication of his work and status is as fruitless as Josef K.'s quest for justice. All Kafka's novels are fragmentary and he asked for them to be destroyed. He achieved the perfection he was looking for in his short stories, notably *Metamorphosis* (*Die Verwandlung*, 1912) and *In the Penal Colony* (*In der Strafkolonie*, 1914) in which the consequences of a single nightmare presupposition are worked out in precise and unemotional detail and an image results capable of indefinitely extensible interpretation. The absence of any mannerism in the style, other than the lack of emotion in the face of the irrational, maintains the integrity of the image and prevents it from becoming a knowing manipulation of the reader of a kind in which Rilke too often indulges.

The epitaph on Austria-Hungary was written during the 1920s and 1930s, and mainly in Berlin, by Robert Musil (1880-1942) in his vast and uncompleted book (it is already begging a question to call it a novel) *The Man Without Qualities* (*Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, 1931-1943). Musil, who originally had enough private means to abandon both a military and a scientific career in favour of literature, already had a reputation before the war thanks to his novel *The Confusions of Young Törless* (*Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törleß*, 1906). Törless is a cadet at a military boarding-

school who becomes aware that his identity lies neither in the world outside him nor in the feelings within him and as a result allows himself to participate, if passively, in the sadistic bullying of a contemporary. A similar combination of intellectual and moral themes, though on a grand scale, was to be attempted in *The Man Without Qualities* as a means to understanding the drift to war in 1914. In its first volume the book had a clearly satirical structure: in 1913 in Austria (called 'Cacania') a committee is set up to prepare the expected celebrations in 1918 of the 70th anniversary of the Emperor's accession, since it has been noted that in the same year the Prussians intend to celebrate 30 years of rule by their own Kaiser. (The book, like its author, has almost as much of Germany in it as of Austria.) As the committee has to work out what developments of the last half-century should be given prominence, its deliberations turn into an intellectual stock-taking which allows Musil to parade ironically every kind of ideology before the uncommitted eyes of his central character Ulrich. But in the later stages of Musil's work the reflective and 'essayistic' elements (his own word) multiplied out of control; his scepticism about the possibility of narrative, whether in a novel or in the historical understanding of the human past, had an increasingly inhibiting effect; and his fate in the end resembled that of his earlier hero, Törless, the passive, and so partially implicated, witness of a crime. The free-floating intellectualism prevented the book from grasping the moral, political, and personal disasters of 1914 which a historical approach would have made central; and so the fragmentary and inconclusive state in which the project ended reflected the inability of even the best-intentioned thinkers to do more than watch when in 1933 the sadists turned ideology into history.

Hitler's Empire was the final shock which destroyed what had been Austrian literature. Even by 1938 there was too much of the past to come to terms with, and the next seven years made an impossible task into an inconceivable one. After 1945 writers who tried to understand what it was to be Austrian in terms of the history of the world-power that ended in 1918 tended to be politically conservative and to ignore their country's more recent history. Those who have reacted bitterly to what they see as their compatriots' refusal to recognize their share of responsibility for Nazi crimes, such as the novelist Thomas Bernhard (1931-1989), have become so shrill and single-minded in their anti-Austrianism that they have had little to say to a more general public. The awareness of language has continued to distinguish the local tradition from that of Germany, and Wittgenstein, now honoured in his own country, has influenced many authors, especially Ingeborg Bachmann (1926-1973), a significant thinker in her own right who left Austria for Italy in 1953. Drawing on Celan in her poetry, in her novel *Malina* (1971) she anticipated some of the themes and methods of the prose-writer and dramatist Elfriede Jelinek (born 1946, Nobel prize 2006). Jelinek's relentless deconstruction of the formulae of ordinary language, especially in the sexual domain, has parallels in the earlier work of Peter Handke (born 1942), whose *Abusing the Audience* (*Publikumsbeschimpfung*, 1966) had considerable success in the Federal republic and internationally. However it is probably only the voluntary exile Bachmann whose sympathies have been broad enough for her interfusing of past and present to bear comparison with the work of W.G. Sebald.