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Helmut Walser Smith, *Germany: A Nation in its Time*

Needless to say, this is a very rich work, almost impossibly ambitious, vast in scope yet finely grained, and filled with much that will be new and thought-provoking even to those who have spent years—or decades—obsessively brooding over many of the same questions and problems treated in the book. Stylistically it is compulsively engaging, managing to pull off the minor miracle of remaining lucid and captivating while never making any concessions to complexity or rigor. (And anyone who knows Helmut personally can unmistakably hear his voice throughout, which is I think as great a compliment as one can pay an author, for as we all know, *le style c'est l'homme*.) The pace is necessarily brisk but somehow it never, or at least rarely, feels hurried, leaving as it does time to linger over particular moments, people, and works that illuminate and deepen the central themes. Structurally, or perhaps theoretically or even philosophically, there is also a fascinating reflection coursing through the book concerning the interconnections between space and time, between the realms of body and mind, matter and spirit. To name only the most obvious example: the inspired use of maps to show how what later *became* Germany, and long before there was or could be anything that went by that name, took shape and came into view only gradually through drawings of the physical space itself. At first, these maps were at best approximations of the lands they purported to depict, and it was only over time that the picture came into ever sharper focus and gained reliably discernible contours, thereby mirroring—and that is the point—the slow, one might say belated process in which the people living in those lands entered both the consciousness of others and their own self-

consciousness. Similarly, and in a related vein, we see how essential *travel* and the reports of travel were in forming an awareness of not just *where* those people were but also *who* they were, showing that they discovered themselves in no small measure by discovering the world around them. Although there are, as I said, considerable philosophical implications to all of this, it is part of the charm and attractiveness of the book that these thorny, difficult issues are not belabored or even really explicitly addressed, but they are there, just below the surface, and they clearly shaped the overall narrative and its deeper intentions.

But this book is unusual in several other important respects as well, unusual at least for a book that presents itself as a work of *history* in any conventional sense. What I mean is, first of all, the extraordinary role that literature and art in general play in the narrative. It is a common complaint—from certain literary scholars at any rate—that, when literature appears at all in historical accounts, it performs a largely illustrative function, as if it is merely meant to lend some lively interest or local color to the serious business of history proper. (In fairness, historians have been known to raise similar objections when literary critics venture into their own domain.) But here imaginative literature is no mere decoration or ornament; Helmut shows us that it was through the insubstantial vehicle of the mind, in the spoken and written word, as it is expressed in poetry, novels, plays, but also in philosophical, historical, and—although this does not receive quite the attention it deserves—theological works, that the German nation was forged *avant et dans la lettre* and through which the Germans created themselves.

Now, this could sound like a story we are already familiar with. But there is something more subtle and important going on here. At the beginning of Part Three of the book, titled “The Age of Nationalism,” Helmut says during his discussion of Heinrich Heine—case in point!—that “no major poet wrote as much about Germany as a symbolic landscape as Heine.” I

think that is a key phrase: in many respects, Germany is portrayed here, and in fact is, a symbolic landscape, a place that is and has always been overlaid and overdetermined by countless and often conflicting symbolic meanings, making it the product of concerted symbolic energy, the projection field of hopes, fears, disappointment, and yearning (another absence I noted, who would have been pertinent here, is Nietzsche). As I read it, it is in this constellation, in the consolidation and evolution of this imaginary realm where the German *nation* was born and then, in the years around 1800, became commingled with the no less illusory but all the more powerful idea of *nationalism*, where the seeds for the multiple horrors of the twentieth century were sown. Helmut puts all of this well in the context of his thoughts on Heinrich von Kleist:

with more precision than the works of any other author, Kleist's writings open a view onto the imaginative sinews of early nationalism, revealing the proximity of idealism and brutality, democratic aspirations and war, and overtly masculine fantasies of aggression and violence, triggered by the realities of military and political weakness. [...] his nationalism reveals something of considerable significance. And this is that in its initial phase German nationalism, however problematic, drew from a coruscating burst of intellectual power and creative energy, making it at once particular and universal, sanguinary and utopian. Placing emotions of love, hate, and fear in the service of state power, German nationalism became one of the most potent and, in the end, lethal political ideologies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

That is not simply good history, and good writing, it is also excellent literary criticism, encapsulating in a few words the essential characteristics of a complex writer's works while making clear, and convincing, their broader significance in cultural and political terms. And in general, one is struck by the assuredness and economy of Helmut's assessments of literary

works—he even manages to say something fresh and revealing—to me, anyway—about one of the most well-known, even hackneyed poems in German, Goethe’s “Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh’,” noting how there is a vertical movement in the poem descending from the heights of God, or Nature, falling gently past the trees and birds, and coming to rest on the solitary, unnamed “du” in the last line. And speaking of Goethe, Helmut doesn’t shrink from offering an intriguing reading of *Faust*, about which he writes—after modestly adding “if one may hazard an interpretation”—that “the intellectual embrace of the natural and the popular is [...] at the center of the tragedy of Faust, a character who (like Herder and Goethe) was no longer satisfied with elevated formulas and pious rules of art.” That, too, seems right to me, but surprising, and as always in Helmut’s treatment of literature, based on what is an informed and sympathetic understanding of the works he discusses.

And speaking, further, of tragedy, I want to conclude with some reflections on the role of tragedy and especially of compassion in the book. We remember that the word “compassion” is contained in the title of the final chapter, “The Presence of Compassion.” But in the Introduction Helmut also says that there are three overarching arguments holding everything together (I actually think there are more, but nevermind), and that “the third argument of the book is about realism and tragedy.” He explains that “this is not a claim about a genre or about a specific literary or artistic form. It is an argument about how a nation summons compassion.” Now, any student of German literature worth her salt will remember Lessing’s grappling with Aristotle’s *Poetics* and his theory of tragedy, and in particular with the nature and function of *catharsis* as we experience the emotions of pity and fear aroused by tragedy, which Lessing interpreted by combining the two emotions of *Angst* and *Mitleid* within a generous conception of *Mitleiden*, or, in a word, active compassion. Not just witnessing, but actually sympathetically

*feeling with* the tragic characters on the stage as they suffer their fate, in Lessing's account, transforms the spectators and renders them more virtuous through their intimate, almost physical experience of the distress and pain of others.

Here, as well, dangers abound. We recall the ridicule that Friedrich Meinecke endured over the book he published in 1946 at the age of eighty-four, *Die deutsche Katastrophe*. The emotion that suffuses his book was seen not so much as compassion as self-pity. Besides making it seem that the Germans were the true victims of the second great catastrophe of the twentieth century, Meinecke's suggestion that the best way for the Germans to recover from their collective trauma was to form so-called *Goethe-Gemeinden* to read and discuss the master's works did not go over well with those who thought such a fastidious withdrawal into the aesthetic realm on the part of the educated elite had been a decisive factor in bringing about that trauma in the first place. But that is not what Helmut means by the compassion he sees as being operative in post-1945 Germany. It is instead a compassion that was hard won precisely by *not* turning away from the reality of the horrors perpetrated by the Germans—and often enough, even if grotesquely, in the name of Goethe—but rather by facing that reality directly and honestly. It is a compassion that the Germans learned by confronting themselves with themselves and trying to come to terms with what they did. It is a process that is similar to that which Helmut describes as animating the Romantic period, if to a different purpose. In Helmut's words:

The Romantics stood for, and pushed forward, a shift in the conception of nationhood from an exterior object of identification—the country pictured, counted, and described from the comfort of a fast-moving coach—to an interior identity, which one felt, and to which, however haltingly, one began to say, “This is who I am.”

Not immediately, but eventually the Germans looked at the Holocaust and began to say: “This is who we are,” or as Richard von Weizsäcker said in his famous speech of 1985: “all of us, guilty or not, old or young, must take on this past.” Helmut argues that most Germans today still embrace the idea and reality of a nation but reject nationalism and nationalist violence. That is not true of all Germans, of course, and time will tell whether nationalism in its historical form has well and truly been consigned to the dustbin of history in Germany. The book concludes with words that allude to that uncertainty, and no doubt intentionally so, in a way that we Americans would be wise to keep in mind as well:

If our understanding of the past has any answers to give, it will contextualize the nation within a history that is far greater than its nationalism, and suggest that historical nationalism, especially in its modern, radical form, cannot make nations. On the contrary, it demeans, divides, and ultimately destroys them.