

## THE ARTIST IN GERMAN LITERATURE\*

By R. B. FARRELL

GOETHE once described his literary works as fragments of a great confession, meaning that his own personal problems furnished the motifs they treat. This type of inspiration has no direct bearing on the question of literary values and in itself does not indicate inability to portray the objective world ; it simply determines the choice of motifs or themes. Nor does it mean that the problems presented are not intimately linked with the life of the age. Goethe, it is true, wrote a few well-constructed works which deal with problems alien to himself, but which lack the vitality and imaginative penetration of those originating in personal experience. The latter, moreover, were written in part, as Goethe has told us, to enable him to rise above and view with detachment the experience that held him in its grip and at times threatened to annihilate him. The result was a kind of catharsis, particularly, as one might expect, in his early period when he passed through a phase of emotional turbulence in his attempt to master himself and the world about him. All this suggests that Goethe was not content to be a poet and nothing more. He was a scientist too, who, on one occasion, goaded by adverse criticism, rated his theory of colours higher than any of his poetical achievements. And in Weimar, where he accepted a post as tutor to the young Duke, Karl August, he played a leading part in the affairs of government. Posterity has in fact come to regard him as one of the last universal geniuses that Europe has produced. It has also pictured him as an Olympian serenely surveying the storms and upheavals of life, a picture which is admissible only if we remember that his serenity and balance had constantly, almost daily, to be won anew. The sense of a healing power, of harmony, radiated through his work is of a kind that springs from a victory over tensions and conflicts and over a frequent mood of disgust with life.

To make a success of living, to grow into a rounded personality, to become a complete human being was Goethe's concern just as much as the creation of literature, and that meant accepting something of the discipline and restraints arising out of one's relations with other human beings in society, and out of action. His classical works present an image of, or at least adumbrate, man characterized by antique wholeness. Certainly, he did not immediately reach this point of view, which is that of a mature mind. His early creative years are known as the time of *Storm and Stress*. Here, both in his life and in his works, we have a picture of a young Titan seeking to embrace the whole of human life and of Nature, in feeling and in action,

\* The Presidential Address delivered at the first Annual General Meeting, 25th August, 1955 by Professor R. B. Farrell, Dr.Phil. (Berlin), M.A.

asserting his creative rights, impatient of restrictions, but without understanding these. His Faust at the beginning of the drama is consumed by an urge to know and to come into living communion with the essence of Nature, and thwarted, obsessed by a feeling of his own impotence and the limitations of life he enters into a pact with the devil, with whose help he will at least find out what this life on earth is, even if he shipwreck in the process. Life presented itself to Goethe in two aspects or two necessary movements, which he called *systole* and *diastole*—one the urge to expand and to become one with the teeming plenitude of existence, and the other to restrict or contract the self and so achieve a valid form. In general, the early works present images of expansion, figures such as Prometheus sometimes serving as symbols, while in his mature years contraction becomes the dominant motive. For the classical Goethe self-development was only possible through contact with other human beings in society and by activity, through self-limitation too, any excess of inner contemplation such as he found in his romantic contemporaries provoking his implacable opposition. The hero of his pedagogical novel, *Wilhelm Meister*, achieves self-mastery when he finds the strength to put aside his youthful illusions of being a born actor, makes his peace with society and embraces a useful occupation.

But the basic conflict or tension persisted in Goethe's life: the effort to reconcile the demands of his poetic genius for unconditional freedom, total experience, with the ethical responsibilities of living in society. In its general form it is the tension between genius and the world of ethical action. Later, Thomas Mann was to raise it to still more general terms as a conflict between the spirit and life (*Geist and Leben*). With spirit he associates the death impulse, symbolically speaking an aspect of his thought which I shall attempt to explain at a more advanced stage of the argument. In two works in particular, Goethe has dealt directly and concentratedly with this basic problem in the man of genius (the *Storm and Stress* writers of the time made the phenomenon of genius one of their main concerns): in *Werther*, written in his early years, and *Tasso*, a drama in classical style and form and under a mask, as it were, a record of his struggles to achieve a balance between the two forces. Werther, who is a painter, but one whose powers are paralysed by an excess of feeling, at the end commits suicide, while the poet Tasso is shown as unable to bridge the gulf and as left with only his art to console him.

Goethe himself defined the theme of his *Tasso* as the disproportion of talent with life, and in this work we have the first attempt to treat the problem of the artist in a comprehensive way. Since then it has become a major theme in German literature, dominating romanticism, not absent from the realist school of the nineteenth century and flowering again in the work of Thomas Mann—in fact even in his recent novel, *Dr. Faustus*,<sup>1</sup> the hero of which is a twelve-tone musician, who is a cold intellectual and despises the primitive vitalism of National Socialism, but who as an artist cannot help expressing the inner spirit of his time—here, it seems, the inhumanity and soullessness of modern large-scale organisation. There is, however, in this music a

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Mann, *Dr. Faustus*, 1948.

bitter ironic note, which is the composer's protest against the spiritual situation to which he is condemned. The artist, Mann would have us believe, is isolated from life, but at the same time expresses the life of his age.

Before dealing more fully with *Werther* and *Tasso*, I would ask you to allow me to digress in order to give you some slight picture of the German background and to explain the fascination of this motive for German writers; why, moreover, German writers have tended to look inwards and to a large extent to draw on their own states of mind and problems rather than to look outwards and portray man in society, in his relations with other people. German literature has consistently presented the individual in his relations with his own self, with God, with Nature, with life as a whole, as he strives to discover its meaning. This philosophical, unsociable character of German literature no doubt accounts for the paucity of its novels in the nineteenth century as compared with English, French or Russian. It may account, too, for the relative lack of good comedy, for this presupposes a society. German literature celebrates its greatest triumphs in lyric poetry, above all in the song lyric. The novel often tends to philosophical musing and vague lyrical effusions, which make it unattractive to Anglo-Saxon readers. Something of this inwardness is characteristic of the German intellectual in general. Culture is typically conceived as an inner kingdom opposed to the world of action, of politics, on which it turns its back in pursuit of an inner freedom which is indifferent to political freedom, which it wrongly sees as agitation, not, in the Western sense, as moral responsibility. This German phenomenon has been a major preoccupation with Thomas Mann, the war of 1914-18 provoking him to affirm the German attitude, subsequent events to assail it with the full weight of his literary authority and to expose this realm of so-called inner freedom as one of unfreedom. That Goethe was aware of such tendencies in the German scene is as certain as that he himself largely succeeded in transcending them. The classical balance he achieved is reflected in the form of his works, while their content, interpreted as symbols, is the record of his struggle for self-development and of his ideas about man. The pedagogical note is strong in Goethe as in German literature generally.

And now to return to the two works I mentioned earlier, to *Werther* and to *Tasso*. *Werther*<sup>2</sup> need not detain us long. Not that it is not a great work, but, dealing with the man of heightened sensibility and emotional excess rather than with the fully-fledged artist, it is less relevant to our purpose. Nevertheless, a relationship is there. Werther, unable to adapt himself to society, is driven in upon himself, and his sensibility finds an outlet in ecstatic communion with Nature (it was the age of Rousseau). But he seeks absolute freedom, he is unable to find solid ground in any limited sphere of reality, and so, in imagination, longs to embrace the whole of Nature. These vaulting feelings which can rest nowhere are described at the beginning of the work—before he meets Lotte, the girl with whom he falls violently in love, but who is betrothed to another. Yet his love appears less as desire for the limited person of

<sup>2</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, 1774.

Lotte than for her, so to speak, as a compression of totality, as a love of the impossible. Gradually his feeling of imprisonment is intensified till even his delight in the plenitude of Nature deserts him and, aware only of a great void, he takes his own life. In *Werther* then we witness the self-destruction of the man of heightened sensibility who cannot establish an active relationship between himself and a limited sphere of reality. Goethe later remarked that Werther's situation was meant to be typical of that of the young middle-class man of poetic sensibility, to whom an opportunity of performing some active task that would absorb his energies was denied by the society of the time.

Tasso, in Goethe's drama of that name,<sup>3</sup> is represented in the opening scenes as just having completed his epic poem *Jerusalem Delivered*,<sup>4</sup> for which he is crowned by the Princess at the art-loving court of Ferrara, where he lives. At the close of the play he is bereft of all else save this gift of self-expression, which consoles him after his attempt to find a way to society has crashed about him in ruin. He says :

And when man in his torment is silent,  
A God gave me the gift of saying how I suffer.

In this play, then, we have the problem of the artist proper, not just of the man who feels too acutely. Yet Tasso has certain characteristics in common with Werther. Society, even the cultured Court, has the effect of throwing him back into himself, and he has the same consuming desire for complete freedom, to fulfil himself outside the restrictions of society. The Duke, Alfons, and his sister, the Princess, who are the audience that Tasso despite all needs, realize that his strange moods and erratic behaviour are part of a fundamental inability to meet society in a normal way. In the Duke's words : " It is an old mistake, he seeks solitude more than company ". And then ". . . Praise and censure he must learn to bear ". At which Leonore, the Princess's friend, remarks : " Talent is formed in seclusion, character in the maelstrom of life ". Alfons continues : " Against many he harbours a suspicion, many, I know full well, who are not his enemies ". Tension mounts on the arrival of Antonio, the practical man of affairs, who has been carrying out negotiations for the Duke in Rome. Tasso takes an instant dislike to him, feels slighted without cause. At the insistence of the Princess, to whom his emotional nature is quick to respond, he endeavours to come to terms with Antonio, but since he is impetuous, here too, immediately offering him friendship, he receives a rebuff that prompts him to draw his sword. The Duke, coming on the scene, banishes him to his room. After this humiliation he more and more loses contact with reality, above all with the conventions and forms that govern life at the Court, and he so far forgets himself, suddenly mistaking the meaning of what the Princess says, as to embrace her violently. At the end, his passion subsiding, he hopelessly turns to Antonio, confessing that he will never be able to bridge the gap between himself and society, which, be it noted, for it is the implied point of view of the play, is represented as having its own value.

<sup>3</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Torquato Tasso, Ein Schauspiel*, 1790.

<sup>4</sup> Torquato Tasso, *Gerusalemme Liberata*, 1581.

His artist's nature craves complete freedom and finds it difficult to accept the limitations and restraints without which the world of human intercourse and action would break down. When the Princess, reproaching him with missing the path to human society because of his excessive sensitiveness, observes that he is seeking to establish within himself the Golden Age that does not exist in external reality, his imagination immediately seizes on the term and paints a picture of the Golden Age. It concludes with the words: "allowed is what is pleasing", which the Princess, with an opposing picture of the joys one can reasonably expect from life, corrects to: "allowed is what is seemly". The belief that man can know himself only through others is driven home in all sorts of ways. But when Alfons observes that everything Tasso does and thinks only takes him deeper into himself, and that if he could cure himself of this the man would gain what the poet would lose, Tasso recoils from the suggestion, insisting that life would no longer be life to him if he were not to indulge in his imaginings and weave these into verse. . . "Forbid the silk-worm to spin", he cries, "even if it spins itself closer to death. The precious web it draws out from within itself and does not cease till it has enclosed itself in its coffin".

What this play makes vivid is: first, the free play of imagination for its own sake—in passages where Tasso rises above and forgets the needs of the real situation in which as a man he is placed—and then, as a very condition of this gift, his failure to adjust himself to life. The work introduced a theme on which, in Germany, countless variations have appeared. Some, it is true, do little more than recount the lives of famous artists, particularly in their sensational aspects. Nor was the theme exclusively German. Alfred de Vigny in France portrayed the loneliness and suffering of the great man marked out by his genius as different from the common run of men. But only in Germany has it been treated with such amplitude that it reflects nearly every phase of literary development and reveals every aspect of the problem: the artist as Prometheus shackled by the pettiness of earthly existence, "le malheur d'être poète", the artist as a Bohemian, as an outcast, as a decadent, and so on.

The romantics at the beginning of the nineteenth century wrote hardly a work in which an artist of some kind did not appear, but their point of view differed radically from that presented in *Tasso*. With their impulse to transcend the prosaic bourgeois world of everyday life and with it the moral order of society, the romantics upset Goethe's balance and saw in the artist the only true human being, since only he could live in a continuing state of imagination and so have contact with a higher world. Society with its practical tasks and moral restraints ceased to be a value. Whereas Goethe had shown Wilhelm Meister seeking a useful place in society after realizing that he was not a born actor, the poet Novalis in his *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*<sup>5</sup> consciously set out to show the opposite process—the growth of a poet, transcending society and re-creating the world in his own inner spirit. When the theme was the dissonance between the bourgeois world and an ideal realm of poetry, the sufferings of the poet in the midst of prosaic reality were ascribed not to his inability to achieve

<sup>5</sup> Novalis (pseudonym for Friedrich von Hardenberg), *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, posthumously 1802.

ethical values, but to his desire to escape to the ideal. E. T. A. Hoffmann, some of whose stories may be known to you through Offenbach's opera, lets one of his heroes reach the promised land by being a simple unspoilt soul (the pure fool motif). Others thought it possible to combine intellectual awareness with the naive immediacy of experience that we associate with the poetic attitude of mind.

At first, the romantic, exulting in his sense of freedom, either ignored or mocked at the workaday world, but gradually the sufferings of the artist in this world became the dominant motif. From here it was not a far step to the conception of the artist's gift as a rather dubious one, at times something in the nature of a curse. At any rate, he pays a high price for his visions and his shaping power. The poet Eduard Mörike, in his story *Mozart on the Road to Prague*,<sup>6</sup> gives, more realistically than the romantics had done, a picture of Mozart as man and composer, thirsting for the fulness of life, but living erratically, recklessly, forgetful of his duties, though generous to all, and undermining his health through his way of life. The author not only describes Mozart's works, in particular the finale of *Don Giovanni*, and his method of composition as he saw this, but he contrives to show the moments of aberration and forgetfulness in life as those which give rise to his musical inspiration. Many of the things Mozart does we see on a double plane—the workings of genius beneath the erratic behaviour of the man. Here then, as in *Tasso*, the artist's shortcomings as a man are presented as a condition of his creative power. Any attempt to cure these shortcomings would therefore stifle his genius. As Mörike puts it: "One is almost tempted to believe that he could not behave otherwise, and that, had some totally different line of conduct, in keeping with our ideas of what is seemly and fitting for all men, been somehow imposed upon him by force, it must surely have destroyed the most essential qualities of that wondrous nature". And again: "Yet we know that even these sorrows, too, sublimated and purified, were merged in the deep spring, which, welling from a thousand conduits, poured forth inexhaustibly in his changing melodies all the anguish and the bliss of the human heart". The attraction of the flame for the moth is an omnipresent motif in this work.

Mörike's story is a picture rather than a detailed analysis of the artist's nature. Thomas Mann combines the gift of creating concrete situations and characters with an amazing wealth of psychological knowledge and penetration. He has called himself a chronicler of decadence and disease, a connoisseur of the pathological, and for him genius has frequently something to do with disease. At any rate, his vision of the artist has been overwhelmingly that of a decadent with a tendency to the abyss or, at least, of a being carrying the germs of decadence within him. Mann has described his early attachment to the romantics with their cult of death as a transcendence of the limitations of life, but after the 1914-1918 war with his conversion to republicanism and to democracy, service to life and the possibility of holding the powers of disruption in check, have become more and more prominent as motifs in his thinking and in his work. To Goethe as a guide for living he came somewhat late, but then erected a

<sup>6</sup> Eduard Mörike, *Mozart auf der Reise nach Prag*, 1856.

monument to him in the novel *Lotte in Weimar*,<sup>7</sup> though despite the balance Goethe achieves he is represented as not quite free from slightly decadent features.

For a long time story after story deals directly and centrally with the artist, who is always conceived as an outcast from life, sometimes as akin to the criminal. Not that Mann repeats himself: each work reveals a different aspect of the problem. And he makes his artists convincing as artists, not just as queer human beings, by describing not only their psychological make-up but their works (imagined ones, of course), and their method of composition. In fact, his novels and short stories contain highly developed specimens of literary, art, and particularly musical, criticism. His first novel *Buddenbrooks*,<sup>8</sup> written when he was twenty-five years of age, states, in literary terms of course, his thesis in the most absolute way. This is that the artist emerges in proportion as the robust bourgeois with his firm grip on practical living declines. A picture of the decline of a prosperous family of Hanseatic merchants over several generations, its failing grip on and interest in business affairs and living generally, the emergence of highly individualized characteristics, progressive refinement and inwardness till this development flowers in the musical genius of the representative of the last generation, who shuns life and dies while still a boy. That is the content of a work whose excellence lies in the power with which it catches incipient traits of the artist seen through some failing bourgeois characteristic. Not the least convincing are the types who drift between two worlds, Christian Buddenbrook, for example, who has lost all sense for his family's purposefulness and capacity for hard work and, instead of being transfigured by art, is merely a clown and a ne'er-do-well, who dissipates his substance in dubious adventures. One wonders, however, whether the degree of distaste for life shown by the last Buddenbrook could have issued in any other art but music.

There followed a series of shorter works which all treat some particular aspect of this basic tension between art and life. *Tonio Kröger*<sup>9</sup> is a picture, worked out in a number of impressionistic episodes, of the artist shut out from the life of ordinary human beings and who, although he reaches awareness of their inadequacies, is tortured by his own ironical aloofness and capacity to see through things. He longs for the bliss of the common-place. Repelled by the merely Bohemian type and attracted to his opposite, he comes to realize that as an artist he will for ever be condemned to the pain of this longing for ordinary life. In being a condition of his artist's nature this longing differs, however, rather startlingly from the musician's shrinking from life in *Buddenbrooks*. In *Death in Venice*<sup>10</sup> this aspect of the artist is unfolded more centrally: his impulse towards chaos and death. Gustav von Aschenbach is an ageing writer, whose home is in Munich. Tired out as a result of self-discipline imposed on him by the composition of so many works of classical perfection of form, he feels in need of relaxation and decides to take a summer holiday

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Mann, *Lotte in Weimar*, 1939.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Mann, *Buddenbrooks*, 1901.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Mann, *Tonio Kröger*, 1914.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Mann, *Der Tod in Venedig*, 1913.

in Venice in order to recover his failing energies. In Venice an adventure befalls him of a kind he had never before known. He sees a Polish boy who, to his astonishment, has perfection of beauty. For a while he admires him with the cool detached appraisal of the artist, but then an erotic element creeps into his admiration and gradually, though he does not even speak to the boy, wreaks havoc with the dignified bearing and moral stability which seemed to be his nature. Disintegration of the self is rapid and is accelerated still more by an outbreak of cholera, which in the end claims him as a victim. What Thomas Mann is here saying is that the artist is always at least a threatened nature, his stability is precarious, and that beneath his sense of form he is exposed to the lure of adventures which run counter to the standardized experiences and ethical restraints of the bourgeois world. Aschenbach, as a young man, had believed that to understand all was to pardon all, but breaking with this ethically lax attitude, he had endeavoured to set up norms both in the content and form of his work. "Was it perhaps an intellectual consequence of this rebirth", says Mann, "this new austerity, that from now on his style showed an almost exaggerated sense of beauty, a lofty purity, symmetry, and simplicity, which gave his productions a stamp of the classic, of conscious and deliberate mastery?" "But yet", he goes on, "this moral fibre, surviving the hampering and disintegrating effect of knowledge, does it not result in its turn in a dangerous simplification, in a tendency to equate the world and the human soul, and thus to strengthen the hold of the evil, the forbidden, and the ethically impossible? And has not form two aspects? Is it not moral and immoral at once: moral in so far as it is the expression and result of discipline, immoral—yes, actually hostile to morality—in that of its very essence it is indifferent to good and evil, and deliberately concerned to make the moral world stoop beneath its proud and undivided sceptre".

Not every work of Thomas Mann deals directly with the artist; the *Magic Mountain*,<sup>11</sup> for example, is the story of Everyman in so far as he strays from the well-trodden paths of everyday living into the adventurous lands of the spirit, from life to death, in Mann's symbols, and without finally losing himself in this realm returns strengthened to perform the tasks of living. A kind of dying in order to become. These symbols, which Mann in a suggestive and allusive way constantly relates to the foreground action of the work, require a word of explanation. Life in this context primarily means activity, which is directed to the realization of practical tasks. Those who belong to life are good solid citizens, often intelligent, but not interested in non-practical issues for their own sake and supremely unaware of wider concerns. The devotees of spirit (Geist) seek imaginative knowledge through contemplation, which, because it implies a suspension of activity, Mann associates with death. Mann's heroes of the spirit are, in his symbols, really adventurers in the realm of death, where they forget their personal concerns in the quest of knowledge and understanding for their own sake. They may return enriched to perform the tasks of life. The artist, by definition, is moved by both impulses, but

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Mann, *Der Zauberberg*, 1924.



today finds himself in a special predicament. The character of our age heightens the tension between the artist and life.

Mann has stated that the problems he treated in his novels and which at the time he took to be personal ones (their representation in works being a heightening of possibilities of his nature) had a way of turning out to be those of his age. We have seen that his theme is not simply the opposition between the artist and the bourgeois, but that he conceives this as a very striking instance of a wider antagonism: that between the spirit (Geist) and life or Nature. The man of imagination and sensibility who is concerned with humanist and religious values (all this covered by "Geist", which is not limited to intellect on the one hand or spirit on the other) is, Mann would have us believe, to some degree involved in this situation. It may, of course, be latent in him, without dominating his personal life, but it will affect him more or less, and in particular his creative work. But was not the artist always to a certain extent on bad terms with society, something of a Bohemian? No doubt, yet not in a fundamental way as he is to-day. The classical artist was sustained by a society whose mature way of life gave him a feeling of belonging, even if he broke its rules and conventions. The typical situation of the modern artist is exile, or at least a break with society, and exile is either the overt or the underlying theme of countless present-day works. Icy isolation, a sense of life's absurdity together with a desire to be reintegrated into it, by changing it perhaps, certainly not by accepting our modern technocratic civilisation, which is reducing man to a mere function: this is the situation round which modern literature revolves. It is a protest against the dehumanisation of man. In this very special way the artist to-day is an exile—from a civilisation and society in which he cannot breathe. As far back as romanticism we find the motif of the wanderer seeking a more spacious home, either in the future or, when the anguish of non-fulfilment became too great, wistfully in the past. To understand this development we must go back a stage further: to the Rousseau mood of the late eighteenth century, a desire for the natural as opposed to the artificiality of civilisation and society. Schiller, who was both poet and theorist, in an epoch-making essay, *On Naive and Sentimental Poetry*,<sup>12</sup> perceived certain consequences of this movement for poetry, discovering two basically different types of poet: the naive, who, like Homer, is at one with Nature, himself a piece of Nature; the sentimental, who, having lost Nature, longs for or seeks her. The typical modern poet (or artist) is sentimental in this way, seeking Nature, although not infrequently the sense of estrangement is stronger than that of a search for the lost harmony. The nineteenth century, despite the great realistic novel, develops the theme of exile, sometimes esoterically, and, as the corresponding mode of feeling, a nervy, over-refined sensibility and a subtle sense for the nuance, both far removed from the natural feeling and naive perception of earlier ages. In this process the critical spirit of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, allied with the growth of the scientific sense, has played a part, though no doubt less so than the fact of material

<sup>12</sup> Friedrich von Schiller, *Über Naive und Sentimentalische Dichtung*, 1795.

progress, the spread of mass values, in giving the artist the agonizing feeling of not belonging, in impelling him to seek a new vision of man, either in a secular or in a religious context, or in inducing a mood of cynicism and nihilism.

Thomas Mann has given a more comprehensive picture of the artist than any other writer. He has seen him above all as an exile in a decaying bourgeois civilisation. He is deeply aware that great art does not simply express a negative, but implies love. The artist, therefore, will overcome the special form of isolation imposed on him by our age only when society changes. But Mann would not have us return to an age of simplicity and innocence by abandoning our intellectual gains. He accepts the industrial age and believes that democracy, if we persevere in it, can still make life sweet, reasonable, tolerant and personal.