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THE PRICE OF PIONEERING: POWER AND  
PARALYSIS IN EVELINE HASLER'S NOVELS  
*DIE WACHSFLÜGELFRAU* AND *DER ZEITREISENDE*

The years 1991 and 1994 saw the publication of two historical novels by the Swiss-German writer Eveline Hasler which portrayed the influential but vexed lives of two great Swiss pioneers of the nineteenth century: Emily Kempin (1853–1901), the first German-speaking female law graduate, and Henry Dunant (1828–1910), founder of the International Red Cross and winner of the first Nobel Peace Prize.<sup>1</sup> Both works borrow from authentic contemporary documents such as diaries, letters, and press reports to reconstruct the experiences of the protagonists. Far from idealizing their subject, the novels are noteworthy for the manner in which the consciousness of human potential is alternately raised and subverted. In each character the channelling of highly creative energy in an altruistic cause gives way to social dysfunction and sickness of body and mind. The author probes perennial questions about the achievements and failures of visionaries living in a precarious relationship with society, illustrating the tension between personal strength and fragility, intellect and insanity. Moreover, the two works address themes that remain highly pertinent today, when European legislation regarding equal employment rights for women is in many areas still not enforced, and the world's war zones continue to produce carnage in response to which a proliferation of aid agencies work often in the most hazardous conditions.

Emily Kempin and Henry Dunant are not historical types, but rare individuals who rise above the expectations of their generation. Envisioning a transformation in society, their struggle against hidebound attitudes confronts them with the reality of larger forces with vested interests in limiting and controlling the pace of change. On one level, their stories could be read as a documentation of oppression and powerlessness, as a protest on Hasler's part against the corporate character of a political apparatus that seeks to quash the perceived maverick.<sup>2</sup> Both protagonists end up impoverished, institutionalized, and demented: Kempin at the age of forty-six writes letters of application for work as a domestic servant to try and escape her imprisonment in the Basle mental asylum where she dies two years later; Dunant feverishly records his memoirs from the fastness of the hospital

<sup>1</sup> Awarded in 1901, the prize was shared with the French pacifist Frédéric Passy.

<sup>2</sup> Harro Müller identifies as a characteristic of the modernist historical novel an emphasis on the 'dominance of systemic processes over individual-subjective motive forces in history', and this is amply illustrated in Hasler's work. See Harro Müller, 'Possibilities of the Historical Novel in the 19th and 20th Centuries', in *The Modern German Historical Novel: Paradigms, Problems, Perspectives*, ed. by David Roberts and Philip Thomson (New York and Oxford: Berg, 1991), pp. 57–70 (p. 67).

in Heiden where he spends the last eighteen years of his life tormented by paranoia, bitterness, and physical ailments resulting from long years of hunger. On this level, indeed, the novels are disturbing. At best they allude to the notion of the prophet unwelcome in their own country, the man or woman before his or her time, and at worst they are an indictment of a so-called civilized world that instinctively rejects true proponents of equality and humanity.

Taking a balanced view, however, Hasler's novels also function as memorials to the accomplishments of two Swiss citizens who challenged the status quo and effected social change. 'History is a story', as Henry Steele Commager observes, and 'if history forgets or neglects to tell a story, it will invariably forfeit much of its appeal and much of its authority as well'.<sup>3</sup> Hasler's artistic licence in blurring the dividing-line between history and fiction results in a documentation of events that does not purport to be historiography, but that none the less lends dramatic life to forgotten occurrences and personages. These works are deliberately designated as novels rather than biographies, for choosing 'den künstlerisch-intuitiven Weg',<sup>4</sup> as she calls it, allows her the freedom to break the chronology, to avail herself freely of direct speech and metaphor, and to supplement the historical 'facts' that she has researched with an imaginative reconstruction of the past. In so doing she broadens the spectrum of interpretation for the reader, and creates characters who not only articulate a specific set of nineteenth-century problems but also, inevitably, reflect something of the author's observation of contemporary society. The narratives reveal the inspirational qualities of individuals who believed passionately in a great enterprise, and explore, not uncritically, the truism of the cause being more important than its individual advocate. The following examination of the two works will analyse the psychological texture of the characters Hasler has created and address the strategies she employs in painting a complex picture of both power and paralysis in the lives of these troubled pioneers.

Following its publication in 1991, *Die Wachsflügelfrau* met with broad critical acclaim in the German-speaking press. The work was praised among other things for its narrative technique, 'voll Sprachsicherheit und Spannungskraft',<sup>5</sup> for its shock factor—'ein erschütterndes Lebensbild, eine aufwühlende Lektüre'<sup>6</sup>—and for its contemporary relevance—'eine Geschichte von

<sup>3</sup> Holcomb B. Noble, 'Henry Steele Commager: Obituary', *New York Times*, 3 March 1998, D23.

<sup>4</sup> Eveline Hasler, 'Fakten und Fiktion im historischen Roman', in *Eveline Hasler in Porto: Akten des Workshops über Eveline Hasler in Anwesenheit der Autorin*, ed. by Teresa Martins de Oliveira (Faculdade de Letras, Universidade de Coimbra: Coimbra, 2002), pp. 12–19 (p. 14).

<sup>5</sup> Inge Meidinger-Geise, 'Aus der Chronik des Aufbruchs', *Luxemburger Wort*, 23 January 1992.

<sup>6</sup> Esther Knorr-Anders, 'Depesche des Unheils: Eveline Haslers Roman *Die Wachsflügelfrau*', *Die Welt*, 21 December 1991, p. 19.

erschreckender Aktualität'.<sup>7</sup> Despite the initial endorsement of the newspaper reviewers, however, the novel subsequently failed to inspire academic researchers. Christine Flittner and Gunhild Kübler in their brief analyses respectively question Hasler's method in adopting the standpoint of omniscient narrator<sup>8</sup> and criticize her disjointed chronological approach.<sup>9</sup> The only scholar to devote substantial attention to the novel is Patrick Heller, who examines the complexity of the work's three narrative strands.<sup>10</sup> To date, however, there has been a surprising lack of critical engagement with the work's presentation of female empowerment and disempowerment in the public sphere. The protagonist's challenge to cultural definitions of the feminine, her battle against patriarchal assumptions, and her struggle to meet the demands of wifehood, domesticity, and motherhood in addition to those of a tough career strike a familiar chord in female experience, and for these reasons alone the depiction of her dilemma is of interest. But in the story of Emily Kempin, a woman of exceptional ability and determination by the standards of her time, the conventional debate about gender-specific roles is intensified. Highlighting the male abuse of power which denies her the full exercise of her mental faculties by refusing her access to a professional position appropriate to her qualifications, the narrative presents the fate of an ultimately 'martyred' individual, a recurrent theme of Hasler's fiction.

When the Swiss legal establishment refuses Emily Kempin permission to practise law in the country where she has graduated, she turns to America in the expectation of better prospects. The novel relates her dealings with highly influential figures of her day, her protracted campaign for acceptance as a university lecturer in New York, and her successful establishment of the 'Woman's Law Class', a private law school for female students. Hasler paints an unsentimental picture of a woman who, despite remarkable intellectual acumen and emotional stamina, suffers greatly under the twofold opposition of her own family and institutional authorities. Forced by her son's illness to return to Switzerland just as her work in America is prospering, she begins a fresh battle for admission to the bar, counting even Empress Frederick of

<sup>7</sup> Klara Obermüller, 'Vom Versuch, allen alles zu sein: Die Geschichte der ersten Juristin der Schweiz, Emily Kempin-Spyri', *Die Weltwoche*, 22 August 1991, p. 63.

<sup>8</sup> Christine Flittner, 'Women's Writing in German-Speaking Switzerland: Engaging with Tradition—Eveline Hasler and Gertrud Leutenegger', in *Post-War Women's Writing in German: Feminist Critical Approaches*, ed. by Chris Weedon (Providence, RI, and Oxford: Berghahn, 1997), pp. 305–25 (p. 317).

<sup>9</sup> Gunhild Kübler, 'Kurzer Rundgang auf einer sich wandelnden Szene: Literatur von Frauen in der Schweiz seit 1970', in *Und schrieb und schrieb wie ein Tiger aus dem Busch: Über Schriftstellerinnen in der deutschsprachigen Schweiz*, ed. by Elisabeth Ryter and others (Zurich: Limmat, 1994), pp. 276–94 (p. 281).

<sup>10</sup> Patrick Heller, 'Ich bin der, der das schreibt': *Gestaltete Mittelbarkeit in fünf Romanen der deutschen Schweiz 1988–1993* (Bern and Berlin: Peter Lang, 2002), pp. 203–27.

Germany among her many supporters. Owing to the inequities of gender, however, she must endure poverty and degradation for lack of paid work. The irony of her situation is that she is not ultimately as powerless as she fears, but when her moment of triumph finally arrives, her inner reserves are exhausted. Her mental breakdown is triggered in response to the news, after agonized years of waiting, that she has been approved to practise law in her home city of Zurich.

One of Hasler's most frequently employed devices in accentuating the protagonist's fluctuation between power and paralysis lies in the use of symbols. A feature of all her narratives is the predominance of imagery that creates thought-provoking associations.<sup>11</sup> Kempin's first sight of Bartholdy's iconic Statue of Liberty, for example, is a pivotal point in the narrative, signifying the protagonist's hope for a fresh set of cultural opportunities in the New World. 'Endlich sieht sie sie mit eigenen Augen. Liberty, Kolossalfrau des Rechts [. . .] Die Freiheit — eine Frau, dachte sie. So etwas kann nur den Franzosen einfallen' (pp. 12–13).<sup>12</sup> Her implied humorous jibe at the intransigence of the Swiss, who in her view were far behind the French in terms of attitudes to women's emancipation, reveals a resilient spirit and sets an optimistic tone for this phase of the story. A later family outing to visit the statue provides the setting for her decision on the topic for her doctorate, and thus, despite being a well-worn motif, 'Liberty Enlightening the World' functions as a figurative reference to Emily's attempt to do the same. Other images, however, are less confident. Inspired by an afternoon playing with her children in the snow, the analogy between Emily and a snowplough (p. 92) may at first seem to suggest her strength to sweep hindrances from her path, but is in fact more ambivalent, conveying also the notion that she must push a heavy load of unaccomplished tasks before her. This sense of contending with a multiplicity of domestic and professional commitments is conveyed more darkly in the metaphor of the labyrinth (p. 94), illustrating the recurrent fear of losing her way and ultimately being trapped, which is a central theme in the novel.

The labyrinth motif is of course linked in classical thought to the symbolism embedded in the title *Die Wachsflügelfrau*, as Icarus's father fashioned the two sets of wings in order to escape the labyrinth in which they were imprisoned. On several occasions the Kempin children ask about the Icarus story, and the simple version of Daedalus's warning to his son which their father relates provides an obvious corollary to Emily's situation: 'Fliege nicht zu hoch und

<sup>11</sup> See e.g. Felicity Rash, 'Metaphors of Darkness and Light in Eveline Hasler's *Anna Göldin, letzte Hexe* and *Der Riese im Baum*', in *German Contemporary Writers: Their Aesthetics and their Language*, ed. by Arthur Williams, Stuart Parkes, and Julian Preece (Bern and Berlin: Peter Lang, 1996), pp. 181–200.

<sup>12</sup> Page references to this novel are taken from Eveline Hasler, *Die Wachsflügelfrau*, 11th edn (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2005).

nicht zu tief, immer mir nach! Keine neuen Luftbahnen, keine Kapriolen, keine Luftsprünge' (p. 16). Typifying the language of patriarchal authority that seeks to define female propriety and limit female activity, these words are part of a carefully constructed narrative device mirroring Emily's fate in the archetypal tale of another individual who defied the rules and ventured too high. While Hasler has been criticized for employing a title metaphor which 'suggeriert ein Scheitern aus hybrider Selbstüberschätzung statt — wie es sinnvoll wäre — den vereitelten Aufbruch in die Autonomie',<sup>13</sup> such a judgement seems to overlook the possibility of interpreting the epithet 'Wachsflügel' not as an authorial designation, but as the label attached to Kempin by a reactionary society that censures her audacity in pleading for equality.<sup>14</sup>

An inhibiting factor in Kempin's struggle for self-assertion is that she is a strong woman caught in a lasting conflict with two profoundly flawed men. Her father, Johann Ludwig Spyri, whose 'shadow' over her life is repeatedly referenced throughout the narrative, is a source of debilitating condemnation, and her husband Walter, despite his initial support of her endeavours, ultimately undermines and abandons her. Johann Spyri (brother of Johanna Spyri, author of the Heidi stories) is a larger-than-life figure in the novel, a patriarchal stereotype of the nineteenth-century Christian tradition. Identifying his daughter's talents and intelligence, he treats her like a son during her childhood, abbreviating her name to 'Emil'. However, his superficially jocular statement, 'Pfarrer könnte sie werden oder Advokat, wenn sie kein Mädchen wäre!' (p. 30), reveals a conservatism which refuses to countenance any deviation from what he deems to be an appropriate female role. The withdrawal of his affection and of his material support in response to Emily's marriage to Walter Kempin, whom he regards as too liberal, is followed by a stubborn refusal to acknowledge her subsequent ground-breaking achievements in the world of jurisprudence. In this figure Hasler depicts what Ross Shideler in a broader context calls 'a tremulous patriarchy struggling to impose its crumbling paradigm onto European and American societies in transition'.<sup>15</sup> Even in the promising environment of New York, Emily's inner monologue, which begins, 'Ein Meer zwischen uns, Vater. Ich bin weggegangen aus deinem Leben' (p. 21), indicates her emotional battle to come to terms with this paternal rejection, and the novel on several occasions revisits the paralysing impact of her disappointment, sup-

<sup>13</sup> Kübler, 'Kurzer Rundgang auf einer sich wandelnden Szene', p. 281.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Hasler's own comment on the Icarus metaphor: 'Nicht dass ich selbst sie als schwach gesehen hätte, aber die Gesellschaft von damals sah eine Frau, die "zu hoch hinauf will", auf diese Weise, blickte nach oben und erwartete ihren Sturz' (Hasler, 'Fakten und Fiktion in historischen Roman', pp. 18–19).

<sup>15</sup> Ross Shideler, *Questioning the Father: From Darwin to Zola, Ibsen, Strindberg, and Hardy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 137.

pressed anger, and poignant attachment to the father who both shaped and shunned her.

When Emily marries Walter Kempin, she seems to be starting a new life with a man who embodies a perfect contrast to her father. A mild-mannered theologian and a compassionate individual with a commitment to social reform, he frees his wife from the trap of domesticity and ignorance by teaching her Latin and mathematics in order to enable her to gain admission to university. Adjusting his lifestyle to accommodate her studies and later agreeing to the family's move to America, he is hailed as 'der erträumte Mann des herannahenden 20. Jahrhunderts' (p. 58). This apparently modern man, however, proves too weak to meet the challenge of the New World. Unable to find suitable work or to cope with the change of language and culture, he feels 'er sei geschrumpft, müsse, während seine Frau wachse, eines geheimen Gleichgewichts wegen kleiner werden' (p. 76). Such fatalism and self-pity bring the family to a crisis point, and Walter's decision to return home with two of the children marks the beginning of the end of their functionality as a nuclear unit. Walter's opposition is different from that of Emily's father in that it is more insidious; his emotional neediness and passivity have a torpefying effect that saps the energy she needs to pursue her own goals. The irony that the one who has facilitated her meteoric rise also helps prompt her downfall suggests Walter's inability, even as an enlightened man, to adapt to a partner whose natural gifts are superior to his own. Thus Hasler's narrative demonstrates the pervasiveness of the traditional gender constructions which shape the thinking of both Emily's husband and her father, and intimates a male tendency directly or indirectly to tyrannize women as an expression of their need for power. While neither Johann Spyri nor Walter Kempin can be held personally responsible for Emily's failure, they represent an ideological heritage that she can never fully overcome.

A central aspect of Emily Kempin's ultimate mental and physical collapse is the fact that it is not documented chronologically, in other words it does not follow the portrayal of her academic success, but rather forms the starting-point of the narrative. The opening lines, set in the mental asylum Friedmatt, remove from the story any element of suspense, as well as of hope for a favourable resolution, and present a stark image of alienation:

Der 18. Dezember 1899.

Sie sitzt am Mahagonitisch. Ein Tintenkleck wie ein Teufelskopf ist in den Lack der Tischplatte eingedrungen. Der Schatten einer Palme verfängt sich in ihrem matten, von Schwester Rosa geschnittenen Haar. Sie darf neuerdings zum Briefeschreiben in den Salon der Pensionäre kommen. Eine Gunst? Nein, sie habe diese Sonderregelung 'verdient'. Mache Fortschritte. Keine Fluchtversuche mehr, keine Protestaktionen. (p. 7)

The suggestions here of mental disturbance, disempowerment, and enforced

conformity have an unsettling impact on the reader who already knows from Hasler's preface that this is the story of a highly intelligent and dynamic woman. Patrick Heller makes the point that while only about a tenth of the novel's action is located in Friedmatt, the importance of this setting for the story as a whole is considerable.<sup>16</sup> Kempin's incarceration in this institution is the present reality to which the flashbacks to her past life relate. The director, Dr Wille, circumscribes her existence with an imperious and disagreeable attitude, and sees himself as a guardian of social stability, whose role it is to remove 'die Unruhigen voller Zukunftsvisionen, die Erfinder, die Dichter, die von Dingen faseln, die es noch nicht gibt, die Frauen, die an die Zellenwände des Frauenloses klopfen, ja, sie auch' (p. 25). This revelation of the doctor's criteria for admission to the asylum defines the pretext for Kempin's detention and demonstrates the imperative, even on the cusp of the twentieth century, to control any seditious or unorthodox influence.

Although the narrative focus of the scenes in Friedmatt is Kempin's state of mind as opposed to the details of her terminal illness, the physical disease from which she suffers is none the less significant. The fact that it is a tumour in the womb that brings about her early death provides an ironic link with nineteenth-century gender ideology. The notion of a conflict between intellectual work and the female reproductive system was intensified in the 1880s and 1890s when university education became accessible to women, and female mental exertion was pathologized, suggesting that such activity would create both nervous disorders and malfunctions of the uterus.<sup>17</sup> From a modern perspective the breakdown in Kempin's health has nothing to do with overtaking her brain and everything to do with the disappointment, exhaustion, and penury resulting from years of fruitless struggle to exercise her academic ability freely. A poignant reminder, however, of her own society's misunderstanding both of medical science and of her predicament as a highly gifted woman is attached even to the circumstances of her demise.

For a woman who believed ardently in education and progress, avoiding any discourse associated with backward thinking, Kempin's pronouncements about the growth in her womb appear at first difficult to explain. The not uncommon notion of cancer as a 'sort of demonic pregnancy, a secret and mysterious invader of the body, a death-bearing fetus'<sup>18</sup> is illustrated in her apparently psychotic insistence shortly before her death that she has 'einen Mann im Bauch' (p. 136). Whether this assertion results from a confused

<sup>16</sup> Heller, p. 213.

<sup>17</sup> See Sondra Archimedes, *Gendered Pathologies: The Female Body and Biomedical Discourse in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 42–43.

<sup>18</sup> Elisabetta Nelsen, "'L'invasione smisurata': The Themes of Neurological Disease and Madness in Elsa Morante's Novels", in *Literature and Sickness*, ed. by David Bevan (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993), pp. 81–91 (p. 90).



neurological reaction to the extreme pain for which she refuses medication, or whether it is the rationally chosen metaphor of a sane patient directing her final accusation against the male establishment which has destroyed her, is unclear. A further example of 'abnormal' behaviour is Kempin's strange activity in Friedmatt of dismembering cut-out pictures of men and women from newspapers and putting the pieces in separate gender-specific boxes. Is this symptomatic of the complex psychological reactions of a distressed woman facing death, or a sophisticated figurative statement about her past life in the public sphere for her educated assessors to decipher? Christiane Berneike's answer to her own question 'War Emily Kempin wahnsinnig?' emerges in the negative, although she concedes that there are 'ausreichende Gründe für einen Zusammenbruch'.<sup>19</sup> The narrative ambivalence surrounding Kempin's soundness of mind seems to be a deliberate strategy employed by Hasler to prompt a more thoughtful response to her situation than that which might be engendered by a purely physical affliction. Exploiting the considerable latitude in both popular and psychiatric definitions of insanity, the author leaves room for a range of interpretations, although in any final analysis the protagonist's degeneration and death are the end result of social disenfranchisement and disempowerment.

Another story of a 'martyred' individual, but in this case one with a more affirmative outcome, is *Der Zeitreisende: Die Visionen des Henry Dunant*. Though it was hailed as 'ein Buch, von dem die literarische Schweiz reden wird',<sup>20</sup> the novel's commercial success has not, however, been matched by the critical attention it deserves. In the first substantial press review of the work for the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, Gunhild Kübler's rather disparaging remarks set the tone for subsequent evaluations. Acknowledging the meticulous research underlying the book and the reliability of Hasler's 'bewährtes Modell' in the use of flashbacks and in combining fact and fiction, she expressed disappointment with the overall effect.<sup>21</sup> The harshness of her judgement seems to have served as a deterrent for others from engaging with a text which, despite its flaws, offers a subtle observation of the balance between personal greatness and tragedy. Described by a more sympathetic critic as 'ein Equilibrist zwischen Utopie und Narretei',<sup>22</sup> Hasler's Dunant is, like Emily Kempin, a victim of his own tireless-

<sup>19</sup> Christiane Berneike, 'Juristin, entmündigt: Das Leben von Emily Kempin-Spyri', *Die Tageszeitung*, 14 December 1991, p. 27.

<sup>20</sup> *Der Bund*, 27 June 1994, cited under 'Pressestimmen' on the website of the novel's original publisher Nagel & Kimche AG <<http://www.nagel-kimche.de/index.asp?task=25&isbn=978-3-312-00199-6>> [accessed 3 March 2008].

<sup>21</sup> 'Und trotzdem arbeitet man sich beim Lesen zunehmend lustlos voran. Die hier eingesetzten Mittel zur Belebung eines Denkmals sind so abgegriffen, dass sie nichts mehr taugen' (Gunhild Kübler, 'Zeitreise zu einem Denkmal: Eveline Haslers Roman über Henry Dunant', *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 9 September 1994, p. 33).

<sup>22</sup> Klara Obermüller, 'Grenze des Literarisierens: *Der Zeitreisende* von Eveline Hasler. Ein Bild des tragischen Henry Dunant', *Die Weltwoche*, 6 October 1994, p. 86.

ness as a crusader for change, and the presentation of his oscillation between charisma and extremity is the author's chief achievement in this work.

The main title of the novel, *Der Zeitreisende*, may be seen as ambiguous in the context of a narrative whose protagonist is largely immobilized and frustrated by the restrictions imposed upon him. The epithet has none the less a cultural aptness, given that the notion of time travel, and indeed the concept of history being changed by the time traveller's action, first captured the popular imagination during Dunant's lifetime through the work of H. G. Wells and Mark Twain.<sup>23</sup> But far from inhabiting the realm of science fiction, Dunant's story is attested as true, and Hasler's choice of title has a figurative function, signifying the foresight of a single individual and the impact of his intervention upon future generations. Dunant's vision of a better world manifested itself in ideas that were years ahead of their time: not only his campaign for an internationally recognized system of guaranteed neutrality for those assisting the wounded in war, but also his views on women's emancipation, slavery, and prison conditions would eventually gain credence. Thus his symbolic status as a time traveller indicates a unique ability both to persuade his contemporaries and to anticipate social reforms instituted by his successors.<sup>24</sup>

In approaching the life of an exceptional man who founded what became the world's largest humanitarian organization, Hasler avoids hagiography by highlighting the weaknesses in Dunant's character. His lack of business acumen, his passivity in accepting untoward circumstances, and his tendency to be a dreamer are revealed as the shortcomings of his personality. Eschewing eulogistic references, the author roots her narrative in the cheerless circumstances of Dunant's existence following the catastrophic failure of his industrial enterprise in Algeria, which forced him into sixteen years of itinerant obscurity and poverty. His meagre living conditions in the town of Heiden where he eventually settled in 1887 at the age of fifty-nine form the backdrop for a series of flashbacks which evoke a powerful sense of his lifelong struggle with creditors, ill-health, and the results of men's trickery and rejection. These flashbacks also relate the crucial positive events of Dunant's life: his selfless efforts to help the wounded at the Battle of Solferino in 1859, the publication three years later of *A Memory of Solferino*, in which he formulated his proposal for a permanent relief organization to care for the victims of battle, the implementation of this vision in the birth of the Red Cross in 1863, and the signing of the first Geneva Convention in 1864.<sup>25</sup> The energy with which he pursued his philan-

<sup>23</sup> H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (London: Heinemann, 1895); Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (New York: Webster, 1889).

<sup>24</sup> Recent criticism has explored the concept of historical novelists themselves as time travellers, 'involved in a journey through the dimensions of time and space'. See *Travellers in Time and Space/Reisende durch Zeit und Raum: The German Historical Novel/Der deutschsprachige historische Roman*, ed. by Osman Durrani and Julian Preece (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2001), p. iv.

<sup>25</sup> *Un Souvenir de Solferino* was first published by Jules-Guillaume Fick at Dunant's own expense

thropic mission, his literary talents and charismatic ability to win support for a cause, his doggedness in rejecting political compromise and pursuing ever new strands of reform, all indicate a man of remarkable integrity and zeal. While these merits do not become less significant when viewed from the perspective of old age, they are contextualized by emotional and material suffering that Hasler interweaves in the narrative in order to preclude a simplistic interpretation of Dunant's life.

Setting the tone for what is to come, the novel begins with an image of personal isolation and demise:

Der Mann wußte, daß er auffiel. Der weiße lange Bart fiel auf und der abgetragene Beerdigungsanzug. Manchmal hielt er im Gehen inne, bückte sich auf der Straße nach einem Steinchen, ließ es in die Tasche gleiten. (p. 7)<sup>26</sup>

This figure, by virtue of his otherness, asserts an immediate claim to the reader's attention. The description of his ungroomed and shabby appearance, heightened by the allegorical reference to the funeral suit, and the connotations of madness arising from his initially unexplained behaviour create a demand for recognition. The very fact that he is nameless alludes not only to society's failure to acknowledge Dunant's achievements, but also to his own self-estrangement in later life. Moreover the narrative begins with the ultimate loss of self, on the day Dunant learns that a Geneva newspaper has published the assumption that he is dead. As this information slowly penetrates his consciousness, he is deaf to the casual conversation of his dinner hosts, Frau Altherr and her husband, the local doctor. His forlorn utterance, 'Ich bin tot', repeated four times in short succession, hovers between incredulity and passive indignation that his adversaries have finally succeeded in their aim of effacing his identity. Any expectation of consolation is disappointed by the doctor's judicious reply, 'Keine Sorge, wir schauen zusammen vorwärts' (p. 10). The affirmative pragmatism of his only friends acts as a buffer against Dunant's preoccupation with victimization, offering some hope for a future in which the paralysis resulting from the hurts of the past can still be healed. But the fact that the guest house in which Dunant leads his frugal and lonely existence is called the 'Paradies' is an ironic detail that serves only to underscore the theme of the limits of human ascendancy. The starkness of this opening chapter thus sets the tone for a narrative in which Hasler repeatedly undermines readers' conventional expectations of a visionary tale.

As in *Die Wachsflügelfrau*, in this novel too Hasler accentuates the interplay

in November 1862. The 16,000 copies he ordered were not for sale, but for distribution to interested parties. Meeting with wide acclaim, the book swept Europe in many subsequent editions and translations.

<sup>26</sup> Page references to this novel are taken from Eveline Hasler, *Der Zeitreisende: Die Visionen des Henry Dunant*, 3rd edn (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2005).

between notions of power and paralysis through a profusion of symbols. While the writer's predilection for metaphor may not be to every reader's taste,<sup>27</sup> her choice of language is at least memorable. Of the many examples in *Der Zeitreisende*, four may suffice to illustrate this point. Dunant's indomitable spirit and fearlessness in the face of physical danger are succinctly conveyed when he is depicted as a man 'der wie ein Löwe für eine Sache zu kämpfen vermochte' (p. 90). Any residue of banality in this simile is later expunged when the animal imagery is sharply modified, conveying the scale of his descent in the ranking order. Referring to the meagre monthly allowance of 100 francs which constitutes his only income as a bankrupt, he laments 'Das sind fünfzig Cents mehr pro Tag, als man in Amerika Kostgeld zahlt für einen Hund!' (p. 104). The caustic tone of self-irony in this odd remark intensifies his degradation, and the loss, not only of supremacy, but also of dignity, is apparent. Two other instances of figurative language, which again may be examined as a pair, further elucidate Dunant's ambivalent position in society. The image of the seismograph (p. 50), a finely attuned instrument, sensitive to the smallest movements in the world's rift zones, is an accomplished metaphor for an individual of prophetic stature. After his fall from grace, however, all sense of perceptive leadership is forfeited when he is tersely characterized as a 'Statist in seinem eigenen Stück' (p. 95). In this, perhaps Hasler's most memorable image of the novel, is encapsulated the powerlessness and anonymity of Dunant's situation, reduced to a nondescript role in the masterpiece of his own creation.

In addition to the proliferation of one-off images, Hasler introduces and revisits another motif, namely that of the orange, to reveal important aspects of Dunant's character. The first instance occurs at the end of the opening chapter when as an old man he makes a gift of an orange to the young children of the schoolmaster Sonderegger. The sensuous pleasure of tasting this fruit for the first time conjures up for them associations with exotic foreign lands, and demonstrates Dunant's enduring ability to captivate minds, transporting his listeners beyond their immediate experience. An even stronger picture is conveyed in the subsequent account of the incident in his youth when he rolled an orange across the grass to a girl from the local orphanage who was permitted occasionally to play with her companions in the grounds of the aristocratic Dunant family home, although they were segregated from their privileged counterparts by a barrier of shrubs planted for this purpose. Henry's unauthorized action in purloining the fruit and interacting with the pauper is a symbolic precursor to his future disregard of convention when the need for compassionate engagement overrides prevailing norms. His famous words which inspired the Italian volunteers to tend to the wounded enemy soldiers

<sup>27</sup> Gunhild Kübler asserts, 'Häufiger als in früheren Büchern der Autorin schleppt sich die Prosa mit Hilfe gesuchter Bilder wie auf Stelzen dahin' ('Zeitreise zu einem Denkmal').

at Solferino, 'Tutti fratelli' (they are all brothers), are subtly anticipated in this childhood encounter.

The novel's depiction of Dunant at the zenith of his humanitarian achievement is as stimulating as it is informative. Hasler sets an international scene in which documentary evidence sits comfortably alongside the imaginative recreation of events as Dunant, distinguished and unassailable, earns the praise of Florence Nightingale, Napoleon III, Victor Hugo, Charles Dickens, and the American activist Clara Barton. Resisting the temptation, however, to glorify her protagonist, thereby making him less real, the author exploits the notion of the small step from consuming passion and genius to dysfunction and affliction. In *Der Zeitreisende*, bodily ailment is linked to the experience of personal crisis and marginality. As Dunant reels under the double blow of disastrous failure in business coupled with gradual exclusion by his reactionary fellow committee members from his own Red Cross initiative, he typifies the tendency, associated in the literary imagination particularly with the nineteenth century, to transpose a troubled mind into a sick body. Miriam Bailin writes that such characters fall ill because they are 'isolated and incapacitated by their loss of socially determined status and in retreat from what they experience as disabling psychological conflict'.<sup>28</sup> He denigrates his colleagues, who have already blocked the financial support from the French Emperor which would have covered half his debt, as '*die Neidischen, die Bigotten, die Verleumder*' (p. 140).<sup>29</sup> In the grip of a paranoid delusion that they are now trying to kill him, he refers himself to the relative safety of the Heiden hospital where he will spend close on the last two decades of his life.

The press reviews which criticized a perceived failure by Hasler to maintain sufficient distance from her protagonist perhaps misinterpret her presentation of his paranoia.<sup>30</sup> Dunant's accusations, laden with confusion and fear, are not to be mistaken for authorial comment. Rather than drawing the reader into an identification with Dunant's persecution complex, the narrative focus on his psychosis has an alienating effect on the rational observer who, while empathizing with his predicament, identifies him as a damaged figure. Moreover, Hasler's portrayal of his years of sickness is subtly executed. The illnesses from which Dunant suffers remain largely unspecified, and there is considerable narrative ambivalence surrounding his condition as a long-term patient: 'In der Rubrik "Krankheit" wechselten die Eintragungen: leichte Melancholie, Bauchkatarrh, Verfolgungsideen' (pp. 200–01). While the years of deprivation

<sup>28</sup> Miriam Bailin, *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction: The Art of Being Ill* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> Hasler uses italics here, as in other novels, for quotations taken from authentic sources, in this case an unpublished, confidential letter of 21 April 1892 from Dunant to Dr Altherr, 'à brûler après la lecture'.

<sup>30</sup> See Gerhard Mack, 'Der gute Mensch aus Genf: Eveline Haslers Roman über Henry Dunant', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 23 October 1994, p. iv, and Kübler, 'Zeitreise zu einem Denkmal'.

he has suffered make a range of genuine ailments entirely probable, an element of hypochondria manifests itself in his preoccupation with minor symptoms and obsessive self-diagnosis:

Muskelkrämpfe, ein Zucken und Reißen in den Gliedern, panische Angst, für immer gelähmt zu werden. Für Dr. Altherr notiert er auf einem Zettel die Namen möglicher Krankheiten: chronische Nervenreizung, Entzündung der Venen, Muskellähmung, Hepatitis, ataxisches Fieber, Meningitis. (p. 139)

Despite the anxiety and physical discomfort attached to Dunant's invalidism, however, there is a sense in which this immobilization allows him to sequester himself while labouring prodigiously on his memoirs, *L'Avenir sanglant*. Unswervingly focused on his vision for a more humane world, and determined to complete this work for the benefit of future generations, he pushes his body to its limits: 'Sein Körper, alt, zerbrechlich, ein Wrack, mußte noch durchhalten, bis die Ernte eingebracht war' (p. 121). But these words of inner monologue are perhaps not entirely convincing in their suggestion that his task is painfully executed at the expense of his own well-being. The slant of Hasler's narrative does not preclude the notion that the physical paralysis in which Dunant immures himself in later life barely conceals a compelling intellectual agenda, namely the desire to write. With complete control over the expenditure of his energy and the ready excuse of indisposition to repel unwanted distractions, he is able to regain a degree of his lost supremacy.

The conclusion of the novel brings for Dunant restitution in the form of rediscovery by the outside world<sup>31</sup> and his nomination for the first Nobel Peace Prize. The sufferings he has endured are compensated for by the belated but authentic recognition of his peers, and his bitterness is assuaged. In lines abounding with the metaphors which are Hasler's speciality, there resonates a conviction that Dunant's powers of inspiration will long outlive his wasted body, that the paralysis which has dogged his mission is not, after all, to prove a permanent condition:

Ein steinerner, längst zu Tode getragener Ritter, der noch einen Schatz zu bewachen hat, in innerer Zwiesprache mit den Wörtern in seinen Heften. Weizenkörner sind es, wie man sie den Mumien ins Grab mitgegeben hat, Keimlinge, fähig, Jahrhunderte später noch die Schale zu sprengen. (p. 206)

Ultimately, therefore, the narrative's oscillation between victimization and energy is decided in favour of the latter. Dunant's defiance of the twofold constriction placed upon him by social exclusion and physical debility results in a positive outcome for the cause that he defends, although on a personal level he has paid a high price for his pioneering vision.

<sup>31</sup> Based on a personal interview, Georg Baumberger's article in September 1895 in the Stuttgart magazine *Über Land und Meer* brought wide recognition for Dunant.

Although *Der Zeitreisende* ends on a more affirmative note than *Die Wachsflügel*, neither text indulges the simplistic notion of the full empowerment and victory of the socially disenfranchised but morally worthy protagonist. Both novels concern themselves with the extirpation of hereditary, patriarchal structures which prevent men and women alike from effecting progress to a more egalitarian and humane society, but sound no more than a moderate note of optimism for the future. The sense of historical continuity that Hasler lends her material is none the less significant. While it has long been accepted that historical plays are as much a comment on the playwright's own times as on the periods about which they are written,<sup>32</sup> the historical novel has had to defend itself against the charge of being an anachronistic literary genre offering escape from reality. One of its stoutest champions, Alfred Döblin, promoted the capacity of the historical novel to express aspects of the contemporary world,<sup>33</sup> and Hasler's work follows in a similar vein: 'Ich würde nie einen historischen Stoff angehen, der nicht die Fäden spinnt zu mir in die Gegenwart.'<sup>34</sup> Their clear relationship to the present strengthens the value of the novels under consideration as a record of personal struggle and as a statement about the difficulty of change. The critique in *Die Wachsflügel* of persistent cultural stereotypes for female behaviour and in *Der Zeitreisende* of opposition to liberal initiatives that upset the political status quo have a continuing resonance that the author herself spotlights in the opening frames of each work. In 1989, when Hasler visits the psychiatric institute where Emily Kempin died, the persistence in expunging the memory of this subversive inmate is brought home to her by the director's outright denial that she ever resided there: 'diese Frau hat es nie gegeben' (p. 5); and in 1993, as she researches Dunant's writings on peace, the war in the former Yugoslavia is making headlines and prompting street demonstrations in Geneva. Both of these observations highlight Hasler's view at the time of writing of how little the world had changed in the space of a century. The fact that subsequent years have scarcely brought improvement not only lends poignancy to the efforts of two exceptional individuals who envisaged a better outcome, but also underscores the importance of telling their stories to today's generation.

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<sup>32</sup> See Herbert Lindenberger, *Historical Drama: The Relation of Literature and Reality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 5.

<sup>33</sup> Alfred Döblin, *Die literarische Situation* (Baden-Baden: Keppler, 1947), p. 29.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Obermüller, 'Grenze des Literarisierens'.