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NORTH AND SOUTH IN THE
NINETEENTH-CENTURY IMAGE OF GERMANY

Joep Leerssen

'Zwei Seelen, wohnen, ach! in meiner Brust!' says Faust to Wagner.¹ He states a philosophical predicament, an essential dualism in the human condition: the tension between the love of the material world and the yearning for spiritual transcendence. It is a psychological internalization of the older view that man stood between ape and angel, with his feet on the ground and his gaze in the air.

Like many a pregnant truth, the phrase has been widely cited and (mis-)applied; one is apt to hear it whenever a dilemma or a difficult choice is faced. It has also become a symbol, almost, for the vexed question as to the German national identity, which appears to be characterized by an essential ambiguity, a tension between two contrary impulses. The contradictory, divided German has become a formula. Germany as, on the one hand, the land of *Dichter und Denker* and, on the other hand, the home of *Richter und Henker*. Germany as the meeting place between east and west, sitting on that

¹ Goethe, *Faust I* (1808), Vor dem Tore, 1112.

geopolitical fence called *Mitteleuropa*;² Germany as something that is either *Heimat* or *Vaterland*, *Gemeinschaft* or *Gesellschaft*; Germany as a country torn into two halves by the Iron Curtain, its postwar decades characterized by the dream of *Wiedervereinigung*.

The image of Germany is characterized by this deep-seated sense of inner contradiction and self-opposition: Gerd Rohmann speaks of the 'theory of the two Germanies' as a cliché.³ Not that this is in itself a specifically German predicament: many national characters are seen as a locus of tension between two opposite impulses.⁴ But in the case of Germany, this duality is often seen as a specific and essential predicament which is somehow central to the national identity. It is this topos in nineteenth-century European cultural history which I want to survey and discuss in the following pages.

The survey must inevitably start with Madame de Staël and her seminal *De l'Allemagne* (1810/1813) — that key text which has fixed the parameters for all later visions and descriptions of Germany. *De l'Allemagne*, it is well known, was written by someone who was equally attracted to romantic literature and repelled by Napoleon's totalitarian leadership. She had already attested to her romantic and anti-classicist preferences in her *De la littérature* (1800) and in her sentimental novels such as *Corinne* (1807); her political opposition meant that the first 1810 edition of *De l'Allemagne* was seized and destroyed by Napoleon's police as it was considered to be an oblique

² Cf. H. Ester, H. Hecker & E. Poettgens (eds.), *Deutschland, aber wo liegt es? Deutschland und Mitteleuropa. Analysen und historische Dokumente* (Amsterdam & Atlanta: Rodopi, 1993).

³ Gerd Rohmann, 'Images of Germany in 20th-Century English Literature', in *As Others See Us. Anglo-German Perceptions*, ed. H. Husemann (Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 1994), pp. 47-68 (68).

⁴ Flanders between sensuality and mysticism; Spain between passion and self-discipline; England between the choleric and the phlegmatic; Ireland between sentimentality and violence; etc. Cf. also note 10, below.

attack on his regime (much as Tacitus had castigated Roman morals by praising northern European virtues in his *Germania*).⁵

Madame de Staël's frame of reference is that of a fundamental opposition between the north and the south of Europe — an opposition which had been long current in the climate theories of national temperament.⁶ The opposition between a 'cool north' and a 'warm south' had been given philosophical and jurisprudential currency in Montesquieu's *L'esprit des lois* (1748), and Madame de Staël herself had expounded precisely that schema in her *De la littérature*. The south of Europe means a mild climate, a sensuous lifestyle, monarchical political systems, and that sense of order and conformism which together with the Romance languages seems to be the cultural and spiritual legacy of the erstwhile Roman Empire. The north of Europe has no such Roman roots; its languages belong to the Germanic family, as do its institutions (most notably, that of parliamentary representation).⁷ The lifestyle is more individualist

⁵ De Staël was in exile during and after the *terreur*, from 1792 to 1797, and again from 1803 to 1813, when Napoleon was in power; it was in the years following 1803 that she got to know the leading literati of Germany and their Romantic movement. *De l'Allemagne* was eventually republished in London in 1813.

⁶ Cf. Waldemar Zacharasiewicz, *Die Klimatheorie in der englischen Literatur und Literaturkritik von der Mitte des 16. bis zum frühen 18. Jahrhundert* (Wien/Stuttgart: Braumüller, 1977). The roots of such climatological determinism can be traced back as far as Hippocrates, witness ΠΕΡΙ ΑΕΡΩΝ ΥΔΑΤΩΝ ΤΟΠΩΝ 'Airs Waters Places', in *Hippocrates*, ed./trl. W.H.S. Jones, vol. I (Loeb's Classical Library; London: Heinemann, 1923), pp. 65-137.

⁷ Parliamentary/republican democracy was widely held to be a north-European, Germanic legacy. Tacitus' description of the Germanic tribes and their political system was of paramount importance in this commonplace, which is admirably traced by M.A. Wes in his 'Tussen Hermann en Hitler', in Id., *Verlagen Verleden. Over geschiedenis en oudheid* (Amsterdam: Wetenschappelijke Uitgeverij, 1980), pp. 124-208. The influence of such ideas on political thought in England is charted by

than conformist (whence also a proclivity to Protestantism), the outlook is meditative rather than sensuous; the literature is marked by pensiveness rather than wit. The terminological opposition between 'romantic' and 'classical' was to sum up these cultural and literary differences.

In that ingrained view of Europe — a classical south as opposed to a romantic north — *De la littérature* unambiguously classes Germany and German literature as part of the north, by virtue of authors such as Klopstock and young Goethe. De Staël pays special attention to Goethe's *Werther* (1774), a novella which itself invokes the same north-south opposition. Young Werther, whom the reader encounters initially as an eager young man of a cheerful disposition, reads and enjoys Homer — that mediterranean, vigorous poet. As his emotional state darkens under the cloud of his unhappy love for Charlotte, however, Werther's reading shifts northward, and he falls under the spell of Ossian, the fey, gloomy poet of darkness and cold, whose sombre passions are more congenial to Werther's state of mind. The transition from emotional stability to violent sentimentality, from level-headedness to wild romance, is signalled by the key phrase *Ossian hat in meinem Herzen den Homer verdrängt*. Similarly, *De la littérature* was to place the two literary traditions of Europe, classical south and romantic north, under the great prototypes of Homer and Ossian. De Staël distinguishes between the literary tradition 'qui vient du midi et celle qui descend du Nord, celle dont Homère est la première source, celle dont Ossian est l'origine'.⁸

De Staël's estimate of Germany as a northern, essentially

Samuel Klinger in his *The Goths in England. A Study in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Thought* (Harvard University Press, 1952).

⁸ Goethe, *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* (Frankfurt/Main: Insel, 1973), p. 110. Germaine de Staël, *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales*, ed. P. van Tieghem (2 vols; Genève: Droz, 1959), vol. 1: 178. All this evidently antedates the realization that Ossian was largely a fabrication by the 'translator' James Macpherson.

romantic country is reiterated in *De l'Allemagne*. However, the tendency to distinguish between north and south seems to obey an impetus of its own and is now also applied to an inner subdivision of Germany. If Germany is northern and romantic, then that is particularly true of the north of Germany, and a little less so of the south, where there are certain sensuous tendencies.

Il était assez généralement reconnu [...] que les habitants du midi se livraient aux jouissances de la vie physique, pendant que les contrées septentrionales goûtaient plus exclusivement celles de l'âme. [...] On trouve non loin de la Baltique les plus beaux établissements, les savants et les hommes de lettres plus distingués; et depuis Weimar jusqu'à Koenigsberg, depuis Koenigsberg jusqu'à Copenhague, les brouillards et les frimas semblent l'élément naturel des hommes d'une imagination forte et profonde.⁹

Southern Germany falls far short of the fogs and philosophers of Weimar and Königsberg. As the southern half of a northern country, it is neither a true south nor a true north. The climate has neither northern rigour nor southern luxuriance, its temperate mediocrity predisposes the inhabitants to stolidity. Likewise, De Staël's description of Austria paints a picture of stagnation and intellectual lassitude, exacerbated by the political system (pp. 77-82).

Throughout the nineteenth century, descriptions of Germany follow this conceptual bifurcation along north-south lines: the cerebral and austere north as opposed to the more sentimental and sensuous south. It is an image which was ideally suited to the circumstances. It mirrored, at the intra-German level, the larger and well-established opposition between northern and southern Europe.¹⁰ The Cathol-

⁹ Germaine de Staël, *De l'Allemagne* (2 vols.; Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1968), I: 76.

¹⁰ Other European countries appear likewise to have internalized the stereotypical north-south opposition in analogous ways. Northern England counts as austere and masculine when compared to the more mellow and effete south; a similar opposition is current on northern France vs. southern

icism, the gothic or baroque architecture and the vineyard-strewn picturesque landscapes of the Rhine Valley and Bavaria came to stand for one aspect of Germany, the Protestantism and political-economic development of the north (from the Ruhr valley to the Hanseatic cities to Prussia) for quite another. That bifurcated image became current all over Europe — also in England, where Mme de Staël's *De l'Allemagne* had, after all, been eventually published.¹¹ A 'Prussian' image came to be opposed to a 'Austrian/Bavarian' image, and the two came to count as the two extremes in a 'German' temperamental polarity. Political events were to confirm this schema: hard-nosed Prussia was to become the nucleus of a united German state and, by means of diplomatic extortion and even occasional warfare, came to dominate the other German states such as Bavaria (by then a veritable Disneyland where Ludwig II's life imitated Wagner's art). Picturesque Germany was to survive mainly in the fond nostalgia of later imaginings: the operetta statelets, the Ruritania of Anthony Hope's *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1894).

At the end of the nineteenth century, this bifurcated image still contains the fragments of Madame de Staël's stereotypical opposition between 'northern' and 'southern' characteristics. The older notion of nordic individualism and liberty has fallen by the wayside. Germany, once described by Madame de Staël in terms of its *anarchie douce et paisible* and constantly opposed to the uniformity and conformism of French culture, is in the 1870s seen as a regulated and closed society: there is military discipline and a rigid hierarchy in the north, and a feudal, more picturesque but no less pronounced class division in the south; German *Titelsucht* becomes a commonplace. What is left

France, or The Netherlands 'north of the Great Rivers' as opposed to that portion 'south of the Rivers'. Many more examples could be added and indicate a fruitful field for future research.

¹¹ For the development of a 'southern'-German image in the course of nineteenth-century English literature, see Günther Blaicher, *Das Deutschlandbild in der englischen Literatur* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1992).

of the old romantic imagery is the fact that the north still tends to be credited with the spirit of speculation, philosophical system-building and academic research, whereas the south retains its picturesqueness and penchant for sentimental conviviality. The two Germanies, of systematics and sentiment, meet in humorous descriptions like Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men on the Bummel* (1900); but when, in the course of the present century, attitudes towards Germany darken under the more sinister course of political events, the contrast will acquire a macabre ring: German antisemitism is traced back both to the systems and theories of perverted scholarship and to the red-necked beer-swilling conviviality of the Hofbraukeller.

After 1870-71, French attitudes to Germany continued to carry the imprint of this regional north-south differentiation. Bavaria counted as an erstwhile French ally, Prussia as the arch-enemy; the centralization of the German lands around Prussian leadership was therefore seen with great misgiving, southern (Bavarian) particularism met with sympathy and support. After the *débâcle* of 1870-71, French authors saw Germany as a realm subdued and self-estranged by its wicked northern component. A publication like Victor Tissot's *Les Prussiens en Allemagne* (1877) is insistent and emphatic on this point. 'Entre les Allemands du Sud et les Allemands du Nord, la différence est presque aussi grande qu'entre les Italiens et les Anglais'; the union between Prussia and Bavaria contracted (as he puts it) at Versailles in 1871 is 'un mariage de convenances politiques fort mal assorti, et la Bavière, si elle osait, plaiderait en séparation'. In modern Germany, the north is the head, the south is the belly, Tissot writes, and he dwells extensively on the mutual mistrust between Prussians and Bavarians; his descriptions are always to the northerners' disadvantage.¹² The general tone can be sampled from a passage like the following:

¹² Victor Tissot, *Les Prussiens en Allemagne* (Paris: Dentu, 1877), pp. 266-269. This was the second volume of a trilogy entitled *Voyage au pays des milliards*.

Le caractère prussien qui domine aujourd'hui dans la politique, n'est pas le caractère allemand; car la Prusse n'est pas une nation, c'est un système. Le royaume de Prusse, a dit un Prussien, est un espèce d'horloge qui s'arrête dès qu'une roue est dérangée. Une fois le mécanisme détraqué, le caractère politique actuel disparaîtra. (p. 266)

This attitude was to mark French policy throughout the present century: the aim of *morcellement*, the attempt to demarcate spheres of influence in the Rhineland and in the south-west (witness the various occupations) testifies to the notion that Germany ought to be redeemed from its centralism and Prussian leadership.¹³

In the present century, traces of the north-south opposition have remained in evidence, even though there was little in current affairs to keep the division alive in the minds of observers. The Third Reich had buried north-south contrasts in its *sui generis* racist and territorial outlook, and the aftermath of 1945 resulted in an east-west, rather than north-south opposition. Even so, anti-'Berlin' stirrings of Bavarian and Rhineland separatism have occurred, and differences between *Preuss* and *Bayer* are still in fashion, mostly expressed in anecdotes but occasionally in political discourse — witness Franz-Josef Strauss's much-publicized mistrust of *Nordlichter* (liberal-inclined Christian Democrats from the northern *Länder*). Upon becoming president of the *Bundesrepublik* in 1979, Karl Carstens made a heavily symbolic foot journey across Germany from south to north. Similarly, in the realm of literature, Peter Handke's film script *Falsche Bewegung* (1973; filmed in that year by Wim Wenders under the same title), maps the development of a budding artist by making him travel from his home town of Heide, in Schleswig-Holstein, to the Zugspitze in the Bavarian Alps. The artist, in search of experiences and encounters, and facing the dilemmatic division between *das Poetische und das Politische*, is named 'Wilhelm Meister' in an overt

¹³ Concerning the consistency of French post-war policy vis-à-vis Germany, see Max Jansen, 'France's European Policy: *Plus ça change...*', *Yearbook of European Studies*, 2 (1989): 89-103.

reference to the great prototype of the German *Bildungsroman*.¹⁴ However, an equally important source-text for this type of 'young man in search of an artistic identity by traveling along the north-south spine of his fatherland' is obviously Thomas Mann's *Tonio Kröger*.

Tonio Kröger, a *Bildungsroman* rather than a *Bildungsroman*, dates from 1903 and documents Mann's refusal of aestheticism, and his assertion of a patrician-*bürgerlich* realism tempered with modernist irony: the attitude from which Tonio gains his literary identity contains 'Sehnsucht [...] und schwermütiger Neid und ein klein wenig Verachtung und eine ganz keusche Seligkeit'.¹⁵ *Tonio Kröger* contains elements foreshadowing *Buddenbrooks* (e.g., the fall of a patrician merchant family in a Hanseatic city owing to the increasing artistic and emotional refinement of its succeeding generations); Mann himself expressed his fondness of this novella in his *Lebensabriss* of 1930 and repeatedly invoked it in his *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*. Obviously *Tonio Kröger* occupies a seminal position in the career of this cardinal twentieth-century German author. It is also heavily autobiographical. Like Mann himself, Tonio is the son of a patrician father and a foreign mother. Mann's own mother was Brazilian; Tonio's mother is described as 'so anders [...] als die Damen der Stadt, weil der Vater sie einstmals von ganz unten auf der Landkarte heraufgeholt hatte' (p. 12).

The overdetermined polarity in Tonio Kröger's character already announces itself in the temperamental-geographical contrast between his parents. Northern Germany is paternal, businesslike, cerebral, down to earth; there is, however, an opposite streak in Tonio, which draws him to art, and which is maternally-inherited (together with his outlandish name and his brown eyes, as opposed to all the steel-blue and sky-blue eyes of his schoolmates) and linked

¹⁴ Peter Handke, *Falsche Bewegung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1975).

¹⁵ The concluding sentence of the first and the last section. Thomas Mann, *Tonio Kröger / Mario und der Zauberer* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1973), pp. 17, 66. Further references in the text.

to the south. Indeed, a whole set of oppositions runs through the emotional predicament of Tonio Kröger; 'Die ganze Erzählung ist eine Folge von Entgegensetzungen', as Martin Walser puts it, with as its fundamental dilemma (in Walser's view) the one between artist and burgher, *Künstler und Bürger*.¹⁶ Tonio's mother is sentimental and artistically-inclined (she is *feurig*, plays the piano and the mandolin, and after the death of her husband moves back to southern climes 'mit einem Musiker, einem Virtuosen mit italienischem Namen', p. 24). His father (like the entire *Vaterstadt*) is a product of rain, wind and hard-nosed common sense. Between these two extremes, stated in terms that are a straightforward continuation of Madame de Staël's north-south contrast, stands Tonio:

Mein Vater, wissen Sie, war ein nordisches Temperament: betracht-sam, gründlich, korrekt aus Puritanismus und zur Wehmut geneigt; meine Mutter war von unbestimmt exotischem Blut, schön, sinnlich, naiv, zugleich fahrlässig und leidenschaftlich und von einer impul-siven Liederlichkeit. Ganz ohne Zweifel war dies eine Mischung, die ausserordentliche Möglichkeiten — und ausserordentliche Gefahren in sich schloss. Was herauskam, war dies: ein Bürger, der sich in die Kunst verirrt, ein Bohemien mit Heimweh nach der guten Kinderstube, ein Künstler mit schlechtem Gewissen. Denn mein bürgerliches Gewissen ist es ja, was mich in allem Künstler-tum, aller Ausserordentlichkeit und allem Genie etwas tief Zwei-deutiges, tief Anrühiges, tief Zweifelhaftes erblicken lässt [...] Ich stehe zwischen zwei Welten, bin in keiner daheim und habe es in folgedessen ein wenig schwer.¹⁷

The action (such as it is) is motivated by Tonio's predicament, and is persistently couched in terms of north vs. south: Tonio leaves his north-German, wind- and rain-swept home town, its blond, blue-eyed,

¹⁶ Martin Walser, *Selbstbewusstsein und Ironie. Frankfurter Vorlesungen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1981), p. 82.

¹⁷ p. 65. For a critique of this somewhat self-indulgent self-problematiza-tion, see Walser, *op. cit.*, pp. 82-93.

cool and reserved burghers with their

lichten, stahlblauäugigen und blondhaarigen Art, die eine Vorstellung von Reinheit, Ungetrübtheit, Heiterkeit und einer zugleich stolzen und schlichten, unbertührbaren Sprödigkeit hervorrief. (p. 60)

By way of contrast, he goes to the south, to the 'grossen Städten im Süden', driven thither, perhaps, by 'das Blut seiner Mutter'. The south is obviously the locus of art and sensuality; Tonio 'geriet [...] in Abenteuer des Fleisches, stieg tief hinab in Wollust' (p. 25). However, if his temperament was too southerly for his Hanseatic home town, it is also too nordic for the sensuous, sundrenched south: 'das Erbteil seines Vaters [...] des langen, sinnenden, reinlich gekleideten Mannes mit der Feldblume im Knoploch' makes itself felt and fills him with 'Ekel und Hass gegen die Sinne [...] und ein Lechzen nach Reinheit und wohlanständigem Frieden' (p. 25).

Thus Tonio commences his gradual return northward. A midway point is reached for a while in Munich, where he gets involved with the Russian artist Lisaweta Iwanowna. Eventually, however, his longing for the cool and untroubled climes of the true north breaks through again; in a long discussion with Lisaweta, Tonio reaches a final abnegation of bohemian, orphic art and a definitive commitment to the poised patrician stance of the ironic realist. He goes back to his home town for a brief, bitter visit, and pushes further north into Denmark. (Denmark, to the north of his home town, is the focus of a 'nördliche Neigung' which Tonio feels he has inherited from his father, p. 38.) Here, in a seaside hotel foreshadowing a *contrario* the one where Gustav von Aschenbach will meet his death in Venice, Tonio finally re-encounters the acquaintances and emotions of his adolescence, filling him with 'melancholisch-nordische, innig-ungeschickte Schwerfälligkeit' (p. 63). The tale turns full circle, except that after his yoyo-style Grand Tour, Tonio's love for his nordic roots is more mature, less fraught by its inner tensions and tempered by an ironic awareness of the complexity of life.

Faust felt that 'two souls dwelt in his breast'; young Werther

is swayed from Homer to Ossian; Tonio Kröger feels that he 'stands between two worlds without belonging to either and is somewhat troubled as a result'. Such dilemmas are somehow universal, part of the predicament of the artist or inherent in the *condition humaine*. The predicament had, as far as the nineteenth-century image of 'the German temperament' is concerned, frequently manifested itself in a symbolic and stereotypical tension between a cerebral, cogitative and realist north vs. a sensual, emotional and lyrical-poetical south — an opposition which mirrors in intra-German terms the larger stereotypical opposition between northern and southern Europe. There are, of course, later echoes such as Handke/Wenders's *Falsche Bewegung*; but Mann's novella brings the predominance of this north-south topos almost to a close (though old images, even if they might fade away, never die: the decline of the east-west opposition after 1989 may in due course herald a re-emergence of the old north-south one).

It is an open question whether Mann himself was (despite his posturing to the contrary) caught in the oppositions on which he constructed *Tonio Kröger*, or if indeed he transcended them, commented upon them and manipulated them for his own artistic ends;¹⁸ be that as it may, the very self-consciousness with which Mann invokes the north-south opposition marks a decisive shift. The opposition ceases to be a natural, implicit and categorical pre-given, and becomes a convenient narrative schema, an expedient symbol in the hands of an ironic author. Such an author is no longer subject to the terms of this opposition, but uses them as a tool. In this respect, the ironic mode of post-realist and modernist literature signals perhaps a radical transition in the literary status of national stereotypes.

¹⁸ The respective viewpoints are argued by Martin Walser, *op. cit.*, and Reinhard Baumgart, *Das Ironische und die Ironie in den Werken Thomas Manns* (München: Carl Hanser, 1964).