

## ART VERSUS LIFE IN GERMAN LITERATURE\*

**T**O TALK on art is, in my opinion, to rush in where no self-respecting angel would think of treading. It is a hard subject, primarily difficult because everyone knows something about it. A sense for art is inherent in the human race. Long, long before the dawn of history primitive man made artifacts of rare beauty, and charcoaled on the walls of his cave lifelike, dashing figures of the animals he hunted. Some of the oldest prose works that have come down to us are concerned with form and beauty. Unquestionably our art heritage is overwhelmingly great.

But when one *talks* of art—and I mean art in the abstract, of course—there is really not much that one can add to the sum of human knowledge. Art is one of those subjects like truth, or home, or heaven, or God—we all react positively to such words because we are convinced there are such things and we have a feeling that we understand them. Describing and defining them is another matter. And yet someone is always trying to do just that. From Aristotle down to Benedetto Croce, or whoever has written the latest work on aesthetics, the centuries of human history are dotted with treatises on the subject of art, which are mostly retellings in fanciful language of the few obvious facts. On what other subject has there been so much written and so little said?

The subject of art is alluring because of what we do not, perhaps cannot, know of it. Some sort of mystery surrounds any work of real art, the mystery that attends creation in general. The process by which an observation, an experience of a man is transmuted into a new creation, a song, a dance,

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a poem, a painting, an histrionic portrayal, in short, a work of art, is something which we seem never quite able to analyze, any more than we can determine why just this particular man was called to produce it. That we make free with his product, praise it, tear it apart, or just pooh-pooh it cavalierly, does nothing to clear up the obscurity. The refulgence that emanates from great art blinds rather than enlightens. After we experience it we do not know, we only wonder, what art is.

Under the circumstances you will scarcely expect me to answer the question. Here more than elsewhere definitions are lame. However, I should like to cite one definition of art, not because it is definitive but because it cleverly puts its finger on the point at issue. It is French, as some of the world's most telling phrases are. Émile Zola it was who said: "Une oeuvre d'art est un coin de la nature, vu à travers un temperament." What could be more compact than that? It has a common denominator, accepted by critics unhesitatingly, namely that it is the function of art to reproduce nature. The catch is in the addendum, the footnote. How does the artist reproduce nature? Through the medium of his temperament. I am glad that this lecture is not to be followed by questions and answers; someone might ask me what a temperament is.

By this time you may well have concluded that I have successfully pulled the rug out from under myself by destroying my subject. Let me relieve your puzzlement by saying that I am not going to talk about art at all, but about its effects, and again more specifically about the effect on the artist himself.

The artist is more tangible than art, though hardly less complicated. The mystery that surrounds the creation of a

piece of art attaches also to the artist, and he is by no means unaware of his apartness. Leaving aside the phenomenon of Bohemianism, the long hair, the queer garb, the unconventional habits, which are more often than not affectations that mark the would-be artist, there still remains a separative quality that cuts the artist out of the common herd. It is a phenomenon by no means confined to artists. Anyone who concerns himself with things over and beyond the affairs of the workaday world will soon find himself alone, possibly on some icy, inhospitable peak of existence. It is a common experience of leaders, even those who make every effort to bring the crowd along, that their followers can follow them only so far. They are lucky if the mob does not lose sympathy with them and crucify them. Man has retained something of the instinct of the herd which destroys the animal that is different from the rest.

Artists are individualists and they react variously to the impossibility of keeping step with the rest of the company. Some take it as a matter of course; others feel it as a tragedy. But one and all they recognize their special status and what it implies, and if they feel it strongly they are apt to give expression to their feeling.

Such expressions occur in all literatures. Chateaubriand enjoyed to the full the misery of being the favorite target of fate, Chatterton paid that penalty with his life, Omar bewailed his loss of paradise in matchless quatrains. And do you recall the pithy statement of a poet's frustration in these lines?

Lucretius, nobler than his mood,  
Dropped his plummet down the broad  
Deep universe and spoke his word,  
    No God!  
Finding no bottom he denied

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Divinely the Divine and died  
Chief poet of the Tiberside  
By grace of God.

For some reason which I will not presume to fathom, the Germans, possibly because of their love of metaphysics, their natural penchant for *Grübelei*, or maybe simply because they have left no subject uninvestigated, have been much concerned with the problem of the artist. And since it is a commonplace in Germany that poetry and philosophy go hand in hand, it is no wonder that the philosophical implications of this problem come out strongly in the writings of her poets. Even in the Middle Ages it was not absent. Wolfram von Eschenbach, the creator of *Parzival*, and one of the greatest individualists of all German literature, was so original in his style and his ethical concept that no other mediaeval poet can stand beside him. His contemporary, Gottfried von Strassburg, who produced the most artistic form of the Tristan story and with it the nearest approach to the triangle novel of today, could not abide Wolfram. Two contemporaries could hardly have been further apart than they were, and yet each was full of the conviction that God had called him to show the true way. Conviction of Divine calling was vouchsafed another great contemporary, Walther von der Vogelweide: if ever a poet was born to speak for his people and time it was this singer of the thirteenth century, unexcelled as he was in the art of those who "sing and say."

Consciousness of his high calling and its separative quality may be said to be a constant function of the artist wherever found. But it was reserved for the contemplative eighteenth century and for the mastercraftsman, Goethe, to cast the problem in a work of art.

It is not unusual to find Goethe in the position of pioneer.

By the time he was twenty-five he had set the pace by writing a drama that was the model for his and later generations; and a novel which immediately became known beyond the boundaries of Germany—Napoleon carried his dog-eared copy of *Werther* with him on his campaigns and sought the acquaintance of the author when he reached Germany. Goethe's early lyric poetry bore the unmistakable stamp of genius. No poet ever had less reason to doubt his calling, and Goethe's fame only confirmed his inner conviction. His reputation brought him the acquaintance of the young Duke of Weimar, who invited him to visit his capital. His confidence in Goethe caused him to take the poet into his government; Goethe was put in charge of roads, mines, the tiny army, and also of education. He was effective as an official and gave himself wholly to this work, but he found that it interfered with his writing. After a decade of this sort of thing he tore himself away and went to Italy.

For Goethe life and art were Siamese twins, two entities inseparably bound together. He transplanted his life into his writings. The late Calvin Thomas, rephrasing one of the poet's remarks on that subject, came out with this nugget:

Take my life in one big chunk  
Exactly as I lead it.  
Some men sleep off their drunk,  
Mine's on paper, read it.

That being the case, it is not surprising to find this all important experience thrown into relief in one of his works, the drama, *Torquato Tasso*.

Tasso is the Renaissance poet who made himself famous with the epic on the liberation of Jerusalem. He is shown at the moment when the great work is being finished at the court of the Duke of Ferrara. The Duke, his sister Leonora,

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and her friend Leonora d'Este, are much agog with the great event. They are all proud of Tasso and the latter basks in this princely favor. A sort of state of euphoria exists among the four of them, which is somewhat dashed on the arrival of the fifth character. This is a gentleman named Antonio, the Duke's minister, who manages all the business of the duchy. He returns now from some such mission to find the show stolen by this slip of a poet and he can not quite control his feelings. Tasso, feeling his oats, takes umbrage at Antonio's sarcasm and impetuously draws his sword to defend his honor. To draw a sword in the presence of the Duke is a capital offense, and although Tasso gets off with a reprimand and confinement to his room, his pride is mortally wounded. Antonio, man of the world, effects a reconciliation that saves everyone's face, and here the play ends.

Such an abbreviated summary can, of course, give no conception of Goethe's sympathetic portrayal of his fellow poet's plight. And it might be well to bear in mind that the same Goethe who put himself in Mephistopheles as well as Faust, here is represented by both Antonio and Tasso. But before drawing further conclusions it would be well to see what attitude other writers have taken toward the incompatibility of art and life.

Goethe was a favorite of fortune. His friend, Schiller, who was trained in medicine but turned his back on it for his real love, the drama, struggled against tragic odds all his life without becoming embittered by them. Few great poets have worked under such handicaps as Schiller and he had every reason to register his protest against the fate of the poet. However, he kept his dramas for what seemed to him more tragic subjects and touched on this theme only in some of his poems. According to one of these, called "Pegasus

under the Yoke," an indigent poet offers the fabled winged steed of Apollo for sale. A farmer thinks it is too bad about the wings but decides he can bind or clip them and so pays the price and takes the beast home. His first ride behind the fiery charger brings him to the edge of an abyss; his second flicks him over the moor and lands him in a wrecked vehicle on the pinnacle of a mountain. Drastic measures seem to be indicated; so he yokes Pegasus with an ox to a plow. With no better results: the horse, exhausting himself in his efforts to speed up the ox, falls to the ground. While the infuriated farmer is beating his worthless draft animal, Apollo appears and persuades the farmer to let him try the horse, which, as soon as he feels his master on his back, soars off with him into the clouds. A similar concept is found in "Distribution of the Earth." Zeus has just finished creating the world and calls on men to take it and share it fairly. The countryman takes over the fields, the gentry claim the hunting preserves, the merchant fills his warehouse, and the Junker collects toll on the highways. After these business transactions are completed, the poet puts in his appearance and wants his share. Where, asks the god, had he been. "Lord," replies the poet, "I was with thee. My eye dwelt on the brilliance of thy countenance, I was lost in the harmony of thy works." Zeus has no worldly possessions to give him, but tells the poet to come as often as he likes to dwell with him in his heaven.

To interpret these allegories here would be a waste of time. I only ask that you keep in mind the spirit that Schiller showed.

Goethe's example may well have been the reason why the Austrian dramatist, Franz Grillparzer, offered his version of the artist problem in a drama about the Greek poetess, Sappho. Sappho was the pride of Greece, acclaimed and

crowned in every contest. Grillparzer presents her at the height of her glory, full of every honor her people could give her. At the Olympic Games, from which she has just returned, her eye has fallen on a youth named Phaon, whom she invites to go back with her to the Island of Lesbos. He goes. Who, indeed, would have refused Sappho? But it is awe and veneration rather than love that he feels for her, and it is Melitta, the sixteen-year-old slave girl of Sappho, with whom he falls in love. He flees with her, only to be brought back by Sappho's friends and servants. But the great poetess, broken by her defeat in the venture of love, throws herself from the cliff to her death.

The story of Sappho's unrequited love has been treated many times. Grillparzer, who paid his tribute to classical love themes by dramatizing the stories of Medea, and of Hero and Leander, was concerned here not with the failure of the woman, but of the poet.

Inner frustration is apt to bring the artist's tragedy to the fore. E. T. A. Hoffmann, a contemporary of Goethe, Schiller, and Grillparzer, enjoyed no little popularity while he was writing and left behind a heritage of ideas that have borne fruit in artists like Otto Ludwig, Jaques Offenbach, Richard Wagner, and Edgar Allan Poe. A many-sided genius, fascinating story teller, conductor and composer, he ended his days on the bench of a high Berlin court. That might be called a full life. But there was a seamy side to it, starting with early childhood in a broken home and an uncle's heavy hand of discipline and continuing in the hardships of the musician years. Hoffmann carried with him through life an idealized picture of his musician father which he wrought into several of his works; in all of these the artist, generally a musician, armed with a pure heart and lofty ideas, is embattled against



an uncomprehending and farcical world. Verily, his kingdom is not of this world. Only one of his heroes, the starry-eyed student Anselm, solves the problem by joining the tribe of the salamanders on the fabled island of Atlantis.

Another weird genius who in one respect at least may be put beside Hoffmann is Frank Wedekind, although they are separated in time by almost the whole of the 19th century. There was never anything conventional about Wedekind—nonconformity was in his blood. His father was for a time physician to the Sultan of Turkey, then wandered in the Gold Rush of '49 to California, where he married a stranded German actress half his age; a passionate lover of democracy (he named his son Benjamin Franklin) he could not endure life in his home town of Hanover after it fell into Bismarck's hands, and so he moved to Switzerland.

Frank Wedekind has always defied classification. He knew all the Naturalists, then in their glory, but never made common cause with them. He was even less of a Romanticist. He kept step with nobody. And yet he felt keenly that no one kept step with him. In one of his dramas, and only in one, he made his protest. It has two titles, *King Nicolo* and *Such is Life*. Nicolo has paid too little attention to the politics of being king, with the result that a rebellion, led by a sort of young Fortinbras of a butcher named Pietro, unseats him. As he is being led away to prison he jumps off a bridge and is reported to have drowned. Down stream he crawls out and begins life anew, first as a swineherd, later as a tailor. He is a success at this; his taste is so impeccable that he is in great demand, to the chagrin of his fellow workmen. The latter manage to make him appear guilty of *lèse-majesté*, so that he is sentenced to prison. Here he is happy because he enjoys his own company and is glad not to be bothered with

other people. Later he is an actor, and finally he is court fool to the butcher-king. Then he dies.

This action, not more fantastic than other Wedekind plays, is raised above the level of the others by the fact that it is in verse. Its significance lies in one idea: the king loses his throne but not his kingship. The quality of king is still in him no matter what his occupation is. Be it understood that Benjamin Franklin Wedekind, who himself served a prison sentence for lampooning the late Kaiser, is not making his obeisance before the throne. King here, as the highest rank in the social order, is merely symbolic of the artist, the finest flower of mankind.

If I were asked who among German writers has carried the idea of the special fate of the artist to its furthest extreme I should answer, Carl Spitteler. His consistency and persistence in his concept of the matter was unique, as was also his medium of expressing it. To give any conception of Spitteler and his understanding of his calling is well nigh impossible unless one has time to discuss his work in detail. I must content myself with the barest statement. To begin with, all his work has to do with ideas; realism, the factual literature in ascendency in his day, had no interest for him. He is a classical example of an idealist and individualist. Educated for the ministry, he declined to accept a parish; gifted in music and painting, he left these talents to wither; and once he had read Ariosto, nothing would do him but to become an epic poet too, although the demand for epic poetry had been on the wane for several centuries. He created a world of his own, peopled with imaginary characters who symbolized his ideas. In this world, art is the highest ideal; the artist alone has a soul, and others must plod along with nothing better than a conscience. Communion between the artist and other

people accordingly is reduced to the vanishing point. Like Wedekind's king, Spitteler's artist is happiest when left to himself. He is not *primus inter pares*; rather, he has no peers. Again like Wedekind's king, he can never be anything but what he was born to be. Compromise is out of the question. And there is absolutely no reward save the joy in his artistry.

After hearing all this you will probably be surprised to learn that Carl Spitteler received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1919.

I should like to present one more author who has been seriously concerned with the problem of the artist. He is probably better known to you than the others, for he has lived in our midst now for many years.

A marked dichotomy in his background can be said to have predisposed Thomas Mann to think on this matter. His father, a substantial business man in the Hanseatic town of Lübeck, chose a wife whose father was a German emigrant to Brazil and whose mother was of very mixed descent. This romantic, exotic element in the family may possibly have sparked the literary genius of Thomas Mann, but he still had a wholesome respect for the business ability of his father. These two factors in his life have been played off against one another in his writings, particularly in the earlier ones, with a somewhat surprising twist: neither is presented as ideal, and actually it is the artist who longs for the material world, which for its part takes little note of the artist. Thomas Mann, imbued with the sense of decadence of the *fin de siècle*, finds both these worlds sick. Art becomes something of a disease with him, and renders the artist not merely one apart but abnormal.

The best expression of Mann's conception of this situation is to be found in his little prose work, *Tonio Kröger*. Tonio's

parents, like Mann's, are opposites: a merchant father, impeccable in business and in personal appearance and conduct; a Latin mother, beautiful, emotional, extremely musical. In a fashion, life and art are wedded in this marriage. Tonio is a combination of the two. He writes poetry. He understands and loves his artistic mother. But as the son of his father he condemns her unconventional attitude toward life. His father's censure of his poor grades in school sits better with him than his mother's light-hearted acceptance of them. Tonio becomes a writer but never the out-and-out artist, for the material world and the humdrum existence of ordinary people keep luring him back from the ideal. His greatest longing is not to share Zeus's heaven but to have the normal, healthy, non-artistic people listen to him.

A thoroughgoing treatment of my subject would involve many other writers. I might have talked of the early Romantics and their idolatry of the artist. There is also the so-called "artist novel" that is spread over most of the 19th century. It is hard to leave out poets like Stefan George and Rainer Maria Rilke. However, my purpose is not to exhaust the subject but to show that it was a fairly common phenomenon.

And what conclusions may be drawn from the examples?

The common denominator of all these cases is the awareness that the artist has a special problem which people in general do not understand. The solution, if indeed it may be called that, varies considerably. It will be noticed that Goethe and Thomas Mann, opposed as their outlook on life was, effect a kind of compromise. Goethe, who had combined, after a manner, statesman and poet in himself, wants the two to live and let live: Tasso gets all the kudos, the glory due him, and at the same time weeps tears of gratitude on

Antonio's shoulder because this man of the world will now guide his feet aright. Tonio Kröger is a split personality carrying the two concepts within him; when he lives the one he yearns for the other. He lives with himself by making concessions, and his life is not tragic. Schiller's life was actually tragic but he refused to regard it that way. He is happy to be a poet despite the sacrifices it entails. This is not fatuous blindness in him; it is simply the feeling of *noblesse oblige*—the conviction that if art is one's destiny, one pays the piper without demur because the dance is good.

I do not feel that Hoffmann made a tragedy out of art. He worshipped art and he brought it burnt offerings, mostly his own scorchings. His obvious pleasure in practising his art leaves no doubt of his attitude. One thing stands out clearly: in Hoffmann more than in anyone else except Spitteler the world of the artist is separated by a wide chasm from the usual world of men. The latter is shown as stupid, corrupt, contemptible, and bloated with self-importance.

The late nineteenth century is one of the most pessimistic periods in European thought and this is reflected in a changed attitude toward the problem of the artist. Spitteler, Wedekind, and Thomas Mann all call art a curse. They do not try to escape from it, because there is no escape if one is born that way. We meet in this period the idea that the artist is branded. The mark of Cain is sometimes mentioned in this connection. Ludwig Schaarf entitled a collection of his poems *Tschandalar Songs* and explained that as an Indian Untouchable is marked, so is the poet. Tonio Kröger knows that when he faces an audience to read from his works he will find only his own ilk there, the misfits of society who show their queerness in their faces. Healthy, normal people will be conspicuous by their absence.

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The most poetic presentation of the artist problem is unquestionably Goethe's *Tasso*. Grillparzer, following in his footsteps, also achieved beauty, if not of the whole, certainly in various parts. For that reason I should like to cite as a conclusion to this all too inconclusive discussion one or two passages.\*

Sappho, searching her soul for the key to her predicament, says as she thinks of her former high estate:

Serenely I stood in the fields of poetry,  
Alone with my golden lyre.  
I looked down on the joys of earth  
And its sorrows did not reach up to me.  
The flight of never resting time I marked  
Not by hours but by the lovely flowers  
That I wove into the wreath of my poetry.  
What I gave my song, my song gave back to me,  
And eternal youth blossomed around my head.

Gazing on the young and vigorous Phaon whose entry into her life has so changed her view of the world, she reflects on the relationship of art and life. In the expression of her new humility and her realization that art is unable to satisfy all human longing, Grillparzer poses the forever haunting problem of the artist:

Beauty of body is a wondrous thing  
And love of living a precious gain;  
Courage, commanding strength,  
Resolution and joy in that which is,  
And fancy, serving graciously as she should,  
These adorn the rough road of life,  
And *living* is, after all, life's highest goal.  
'Twas not for naught the muses chose  
The barren laurel for their crown;  
Cold, scentless, bearing no fruit,  
It weighs upon the brow of him

\* Since no English version of Grillparzer's work was available, I have made this off-the-record translation which does scant justice to the beauty of the poet's classic lines.

## The Rice Institute Pamphlet

To whom it promised recompense for  
 Many a sacrifice. Only with anxious heart  
 Can one stand on the heights of humanity  
 And art, alas! is forced  
 (here she holds out her arms to Phaon)  
 To beg of life's abundance.

The final formula for this motif is found by the rationalizing Phaon. When Sappho hurls the word "Deceiver!" at him he replies:

No, I am truly not that!  
 When I swore love to you, it was not deception;  
 I loved you as one loves the gods,  
 As one loves the good and beautiful.  
 With higher beings, Sappho, hold communion;  
 Not with impunity can one leave the feast  
 Of the gods and descend to the company of mortals.  
 The arm in which the golden lyre rested,  
 Is consecrated, let it never embrace something lower.

• • •

For men, love, for the gods, reverence.  
 Give us what is ours and take your own.  
 Consider what you do and what you are.

These are unequivocal words; there can be no retreat from the high calling of the artist. In attempting it, Sappho has compromised herself. She recognizes this and draws the fatal consequences.

Grillparzer has thus voiced the conclusion held by most of the writers we have considered.

This may seem to you a sad conclusion. That, of course, depends on the point of view. As a non-artist, I myself was depressed by the consideration that what I had to say might blast the hopes of some budding artist—some as yet "mute inglorious Milton." But I soon found the answer: artists are not made or unmade by men's words. The making of an artist is an act of God.

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