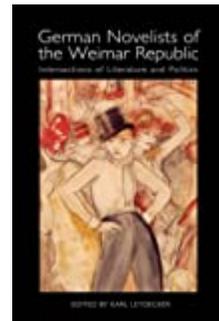




Karl Leydecker, ed. *German Novelists of the Weimar Republic: Intersections of Literature and Politics*. Rochester: Camden House, 2006. viii + 286 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57113-288-8.



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No Quiet on the Novelist Front

Almost since its destruction by the National Socialists the culture of the Weimar Republic—often epitomized by the metropolis Berlin—has been of continuing interest to historians as well as to scholars of literature, film, art, and architecture and to the broader public. In the volume under review, Karl Leydecker edits contributions by eleven fellow Germanists, all of whom have done extensive research on Weimar literature and most of whom teach at Anglo-American universities. Each contributor discusses one German novelist and briefly recounts his or her life before, during, and after the Weimar Republic, while focusing on “the engagement of the novelists with Weimar politics and society, be it in their novels or in essays or other non-fiction” (p. 14). As Leydecker declares, the criterion for inclusion in the collection was that the novelist “published at least one work during the period that was not only popular at the time but has also stood the test of time, being read and studied by later generations of readers and critics” (p. 14). Thus, the volume contains essays on Heinrich Mann (by Karin V. Gunnemann), Hermann Hesse (by Paul Bishop), Lion Feuchtwanger (by Roland Dollinger), Jakob Wassermann (by Leydecker), Joseph Roth (by Helen Chambers), Ernst

Jünger (by Roger Woods), Erich Maria Remarque (by Brian Murdoch), B. Traven (by Karl S. Guthke), Gabriele Tergit (by Fiona Sutton), Alfred Döblin (by David Midgley), Vicky Baum (by Heather Valencia), and Hans Fallada (by Jenny Williams).

Any attempt at choosing authors for inclusion according to such categories would have its problems and it would be easy to name important authors who meet the criteria but are absent from the volume, despite being mentioned in several articles, such as Thomas Mann or Kurt Tucholsky. Still, this particular selection creates certain consequences for the picture of Weimar literary life the volume leaves behind, to which I will return after briefly discussing the most important points of the articles. From the viewpoint of a historian, my concerns lie not so much with the nuances and intricacies of literary interpretation, but deal instead with the title’s historical claim to examine the “intersections of politics and literature.” Most articles offer interesting analyses of major Weimar writers or their most important books, and are easily accessible. Especially because of the short biographical sketches framing the interpretations of the

works, they can be useful as introductory essays for students and scholars unfamiliar with the novelists. Some of the essays, however, are not limited to this introductory value, but offer thought-provoking re-evaluations of eminent writers of Weimar Germany.

In particular, Roger Woods re-evaluates the nationalism of writings by Jäger and other new nationalists. Leaving aside the bulk of new literature on Ernst Jäger and the so-called “conservative revolution,” he shows that Jäger’s war books conveyed a sense of the futility of war and especially of random death delivered by an anonymous war machine. Wood argues that Jäger’s search for a higher meaning did not lead to a straightforward appeal to the nation, but rather to the aestheticization and naturalization of war and the literary transformation of soldiers into timeless warriors. Even though some new nationalists asserted that, as long as one fought, it was unimportant “in which century one fights, or for what ideas or with what weapons” (p. 136), however, statements like these fulfilled precisely the rhetorical role within a second-order nationalism that prepared the nation for the next war. Paul Bishop offers an insightful parallel reading of Hermann Hesse’s *Steppenwolf* and Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. Both published in 1927, they contain similar topoi in their existentialist considerations of death. Roland Dollinger and Leydecker show once again how Feuchtwanger and Wassermann both struggled with their identities as German Jews, feeling alienated from both cultures, and how this struggle played out in publications like *Jud Süss* (1925) or *Mein Weg als Deutscher und Jude* (1921). In her study on Joseph Roth, Helen Chambers mainly concentrates on his non-fictional articles in newspapers and journals. This approach proves to be particularly fruitful, because it offers detailed insights into Roth’s reflections on his largely visual perception of metropolitan life, society, and culture in Weimar Germany. Similarly, Fiona Sutton examines newspaper reports of legal proceedings in Moabit by “Weimar’s Forgotten Cassandra”: Gabriele Tergit. Sutton shows how Tergit’s concrete engagement with the problems of the biased Weimar judicial system and her interest in the difficulties of ordinary people’s lives were translated into the novel *Kaiserin erobert den Kurfürstendam* (1931). David Midgley scrutinizes Alfred Döblin’s literary techniques in confrontation with other contemporary styles, while Heather Valencia concentrates on the popular plot structures of Weimar’s “first-rate second-rate writer,” Vicky Baum. In Baum’s writings the connection to political events is particularly obvious in the novel *Feme* (1926), based on the murder

of the German Foreign Minister Walter Rathenau. An equally close depiction of the problems of German society and politics was Hans Fallada’s *Bauern, Bonzen, Bomben* (1931), which Jenny Williams analyzes.

While providing thoughtful readings of many important books published mostly between the First World War and the establishment of National Socialist rule in 1933, many articles are less convincing when it comes to relating the novelists and their works to the political, social, and cultural context of Weimar Germany. Unfortunately, this lack of historical contextualization, which would have been essential for sustaining the general ambition of the volume, has not been compensated for by the introduction. Here, under the heading “Political Events of the Weimar Republic,” Karl Leydecker offers, in eight pages, a far too general, conventional overview of major events in Germany after the First World War. This piece may be valuable for somebody who does not know anything at all about the Weimar Republic, but it will disappoint anyone who has read at least one of the various textbooks that cover this period. The same applies for the other short parts of the introduction concerning “Weimar Culture” and “Weimar Novelists.” It is a pity that Leydecker refrained from drawing connections and generalizations from the heterogeneous contributions of his volume, because many interesting questions could have been asked. In particular, the “intersections between literature and politics” are mostly presented rather one-dimensionally: the essays examine the novelists’ reactions to political events and social themes or their attempts to influence them, but they do not put as much effort into locating the writers and intellectuals as social figures within the context of Weimar politics and society. When this is done, the authors are treated as single, exceptional cases although it might have been interesting to examine them as a social group. Many texts allude to inflation as an important experience, but they do not elaborate on the specific circumstances of the so-called “intellectual workers” during this period. How important this perspective might have been is revealed by Roland Dollinger’s remark that, because of the inflation, Feuchtwanger’s literary success with *Die hässliche Herzogin* (1923) did not translate into revenue (p. 63).

Apart from the social contextualization, which is rather sketchy throughout the book, other recurring themes in several of the essays might have been worthy of reference in the introduction in order to achieve a comprehensive approach towards the “intersections of politics and literature” in Weimar Germany. For many of the novelists—not only for authors of war literature, such as

Jäger and Remarque—the First World War was a decisive experience that significantly changed their perspectives on the modern world, as it did for Hermann Hesse, and caused upheavals in their social and even familial relations, as it did for Heinrich Mann. Moreover, in their writings several novelists reflected on the importance of science and technology for modern life, mostly assuming an optimistic stance. Leftist and liberal authors worried about lawyers and judges who treated the political crimes committed by right-wing activists with great indulgence, while using the full force of the law against the political Left. Finally, the novelists' self-images as writers and intellectuals deserve further scrutiny. As Dollinger remarks, in this respect many authors, such as Heinrich Mann, Feuchtwanger, and Döblin, were ambivalent, simultaneously erasing the borders between literature and politics and defending the autonomy of art (p. 68). In comparison to such ambitions, Joseph Roth was rather skeptical, declaring that "it is hard to change anything by writing feuilletons" (quoted, p. 106).

With respect to the coherence of the volume, moreover, it might have been useful to focus the articles on one or several of these issues instead of using a very broad notion of "intersections between literature and politics," which can, after all, exist at various levels and consist in very different themes. In some of the texts the relations of the novelists to the Weimar Republic remain rather elusive, as in the case of B. Traven's Mexican novels. Others offer overly simple pictures of the Weimar political landscape. Karin V. Gunnemann, for example, presents Heinrich Mann unambiguously as a good democrat, overlooking anti-democratic tendencies in the *Räte geistiger Arbeiter* (Councils of Intellectual Workers) in which he participated (p. 26); she downplays

Mann's call for a "dictatorship of reason" (p. 30). Moreover, in focusing on just one author, some texts have the tendency to overestimate the importance of their objects of study: Nobody dealt with the "political, social, and cultural upheavals of the new republic with more energy and courageous vision" than Heinrich Mann (p. 19); despite the "immense popularity of his writings," Hermann Hesse "failed to prevent the rise of National Socialism and the outbreak of the Second World War" (p. 57); and *All Quiet on the Western Front* is "arguably the best-known of all Weimar novels" (p. 141). Moreover, some of the texts exhibit a rather flat treatment of the novelists' engagement with emerging National Socialism, either praising them for "anticipating" the horrors of the later National Socialist rule or bemoaning their lack of foresight.

Putting aside these qualifications, the volume contains many thoughtful analyses of major Weimar novelists that do provoke the reader's interest to (re-)read the novels under scrutiny. This reaction may occur because of the editors' decision to include only novels that "stood the test of time" and thus still interest us today. Still, this presentist criterion causes a significant problem for the development of a picture of Weimar literary life. Since none of the right-wing novelists stood the "test of time," with the possible exception of Jäger, even if I have doubts concerning him as well, we get a biased perspective on Weimar culture that seems to consist mostly of leftist and liberal authors or at least of "republicans of reason." From a historical point of view, it might have been more rewarding to examine the "intersections between politics and literature" among novelists widely read at the time whose popularity has waned in the interval, including right-wing authors, such as Hans Grimm, Marie Diers, or Ernst von Salomon.

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