Far Too Short but a Great Pedagogical “Sleeper”:
Rediscovering Nicholas Boyle’s *German Literature: A Very Short Introduction*

After being in the profession for almost twenty years, it frankly feels a little illicit – almost like reading the Cliffs’ Notes version of German literary history. Yet when confronted with the challenge of teaching an extensive literary survey course (ranging from Tieck’s 1797 *Der blonde Eckbert* to Robert Schindel’s 2010 play *Dunkelstein*), as I do in the Carolina-Duke Ph.D. program in German Studies, picking up this slim volume was simply irresistible. There are few of us who couldn’t benefit from a little refresher course. And why not go with the best? Indeed, the imprimatur of one of the greatest Germanists of our time – Nicholas Boyle – seemed to me to mitigate the discomfort of reliving my “prelim” days of cramming the canon.

But such reservations mischaracterize the book from the outset – as the editors themselves inadvertently also do. This is not a condensed version of a larger literary history – one that hits just the summits of agreed upon literary merit and scandal. It is not just a Who’s Who of great German authors. Unexpectedly – at least to me – is that this little book is chock full of original argument, provocative asides, and new insights. Besides providing a skeletal literary history, Boyle challenges the canon, introduces new frameworks, and gives attention to neglected authors. Given the constricted format of the book series, however, these are generally limited to all too brief apercu. We are often left hanging just when we want demonstration, further examples, or other kinds of evidence. This may in part explain the dearth of reviews of both the English and the German versions – though I would quickly add that those relatively few are overwhelmingly positive. What is lacking in this limited reception is a sober assessment of the book’s achievement and its potential benefit in the classroom. Indeed, some reviews strike me as somewhat too respectful, based, I suspect on Boyle’s celebrated work on Goethe.

I can’t provide in these few pages an adequate précis of even this “very short introduction,” let alone the somewhat longer German version. (The German “translation,” by Martin Pfeifer, includes one additional chapter on Austrian and Swiss literature.¹) And that is a tribute to Boyle’s intensity. But I will highlight a few gems to whet the reader’s appetite. Here I happily play the role of *Animierrezensent.*

Boyle sets the stage with a thesis familiar from his Goethe biographies, but expanded in scope: namely that the 18th-century crisis consisted in an attempt to merge the Enlightenment with Lutheranism, a sometimes painful process, which, however resulted in the secularization of key aesthetic terms such as “moral freedom” (as opposed to political liberty) and “Art” as a realm of enacting such freedom. In just a few pages, he explains how the powerful tradition of German “Innerlichkeit” (inwardness) came to dominate literary and aesthetic production. What Boyle cannot explore – given space limitations – is the rise of atheism as the twin brother, so to speak, of the Enlightenment. Even thinkers like Kant and Hegel, who thought they were loyal to the Lutheran church, had long since planted the seeds for modern atheism – a story told lucidly and in great detail in another “short introduction” by Gavin Hyman (A Short History of Atheism). Much of Boyle’s book is guided by the tension he diagnoses within the German middle class – namely, between the court officials (including theologians and university types) and the businessmen. Throughout, he notes the general alienation of authors and poets from the lives and concerns of everyday persons.

Moving at a clip that will require you to read more slowly than you might expect (paradoxically this short book takes a long time to digest properly), Boyle dismisses Romanticism as “the literature of escape” (the Romanticists will be howling), and moves boldly on, displaying his impressive comparatist credentials, to explain German Realism in this way: “[as] literature itself became a paying concern as copyright became enforceable, and novels and plays with such strictly bourgeois themes as money, materialism, and social justice emerged from the realm of the trivial and, for a while, [it] linked Germany’s written culture with that of its neighbours [sic] in Western Europe” (15). Throughout Boyle is keen to place literary production within its political and economic context–but not at the expense of aesthetically sensitive readings.

He describes that slippery German term “Bildung” (meaning both culture and education), for example, as a compromise between two “classes”: the university civil servants and the economically anemic middle class. It worked as a kind of “glue” for German society (or the leading parts thereof) “because it left carefully ambiguous whether you achieved ‘Bildung’ by going to university or simply by reading, or at any rate approving, the right books” (15). The word covered a multitude of differences within German society, while German “classical” literature came to define the state as on par with countries like France and Britain. On the other hand, it was Bildung and its sister term Kultur that would, in the German mind, come to distinguish German culture as superior to the “materialistic” societies of Britain and France that were more successful at establishing global colonies and political power more generally.
The globalization struggle – and the need to find the meaning of nation within it – begins for Boyle even before the First World War. The framing of German literary/cultural history in terms of globalization at this early juncture may surprise some readers, though perhaps it shouldn’t, given Boyle’s earlier work, e.g. *Who Are We Now? Christian Humanism and the Global Market from Hegel to Heaney*. Within the space of just two pages we have arrived at the end of WWII. The political deployment of the classic German cultural tradition during the Cold War (signified in the West by the naming of the Federal Republic’s cultural missions “Goethe Institutes”) served the ideology of both sides, and both the Federal Republic and the German Democratic Republic blithely overlooked the real historical determinants of “Bildung.” Despite the politicization of culture, Boyle also sees it as authentically useful, illuminating the international and cosmopolitan strain in German classicism (a point that Jeffrey Sammons has made with great empirical authority), one that provides a kind of exemplum for other countries situated between “a national past and a global future” (26).

Of the many things he has to say about the central figure of Luther, the most surprising, en passant observation may be this: “his revival of Augustine’s distinction between the earthly and the heavenly cities was the true source of the modern dualism of matter and mind that is usually attributed to Descartes” (30). With the exception of Grimmelshausen, Boyle’s narrative makes note of the subordination of every major thinker (Luther, Opitz, Leibnitz and others) to state power. About Lessing, he has a good deal to say, but no sentence is better than this: “In 1797 . . . [he] carried out the most effective literary assassination in the German language when in a single issue of his periodical he dismissed Gottsched’s ‘reforms,’ put Shakespeare in the place of Gottsched’s French models, and pointed German writers looking for authentic local material to the home-grown story of Dr. Faust (whom he envisioned as an Enlightenment seeker of truth, who could certainly not be condemned to eternal punishment) (45-6).”

Goethe is of course Boyle’s great forte, so it is perhaps no surprise that he can make a cogent argument about *Werther* (as a novel about social norms, not just personal feeling) within the space of just over a page (51-2). To treat *Urfaust* in the same amount of space seems almost a crime, but Boyle pulls it off (at least provisionally) by pointing to the play’s poetry as the cohesive device. Similarly, one would be hard pressed to find a pithier précis of central tenants of Kantian philosophy and its relation to politics than in this slim volume: All instructors interested in the interplay of philosophy and bourgeois politics should have their students read this passage (59), a theme taken up appropriately later in the book in relation to *Faust* (64-5).
With equal economy of phrase, Boyle captures the (somewhat hidden) secularizing core of the new classical German literature inaugurated by Lessing’s posthumous drama: “Nathan is a comedy which purports to show the achievement of mutual tolerance between representatives of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In fact they recognize rather that they all share a fourth, rational, religion, which refrains from judging the truth of any of the acknowledged faiths and constitutes a kind of secret freemasonry of those ‘for whom it is enough to be called human’” (60). Later, he will note – following one of the “red threads” of this concise study – that “Novalis rescued religion from secularization, but at the price of making it indistinguishable from aesthetics” (66). He might have added that Arthur Schnitzler’s Professor Bernhardi (1912), well over a century after the production of Nathan der Weise, serves as an intellectual bookend to Lessing by placing the value of any religion, but particularly that of Judaism, squarely within its rationalist and humanist residuals.

To counter the impression that German literature, with its famous collections of folk songs and fairy tales (von Arnim & Brentano and the Grimm brothers) was culturally introverted, he reminds us of substantial internationalizing trends: “Wilhelm von Humboldt and the Schlegels made themselves expert in the languages of ancient India, while Alexander von Humboldt, after years of exploration in the Americas, began to see the world as a single biological system” (76). Typically, Boyle (well before the Humboldts’ story would be reprised by Michael Kehlmann in Die Vermessung der Welt) is always also interested in larger, supra-national, and extra-literary social and intellectual developments.

The “short story” continues like this – both with familiar literary genealogies and refreshingly candid assessments, down to his generous praise of W. G. Sebald. Boyle’s wit and sovereign judgment is captured just about as well as anywhere else in this survey in this remark about Tieck: “…he was a literary jackdaw, appropriating whatever was fashionable and could be made to sell without always appreciating its worth…” (73).

The problem with all this is that it doesn’t really work as a literary survey. It presumes the very knowledge it wants to impart. Beginning students will be lost, and seasoned Germanists will inevitably want more. For every bold and clever insight, students will need much more context, and scholars will want much more evidence and discussion. The German version takes a step in this direction (it has one extra chapter), but essentially retains the all-too-brief format. The series concept just doesn’t fit Boyle’s erudition, or our needs; nor can it do justice to a fraction of the German literary tradition.

We can hope instead that this little book serves as a down payment on a proper literary history that would let his learning shine. That would
be an undertaking to rival the Goethe biography. But in the mean time, I’ve found a handy pedagogical use for this little book after all. Rather than have students struggle with a narrative that too often simply leaves out essential context, misses the opportunity to fully substantiate its insights, and fails to highlight its own divergence from conventional readings, select instead one of those (often controversial) gems mentioned above – or another from the latter half of the book – and make it the object of discussion, or even examination. Give students – to take another example – Boyle’s one page treatment of the famous “Schnee-Kapitel” from Der Zauberberg, and use it as a prompt for a conversation and deeper discussion that Boyle’s book cannot – given its conception – really provide. His waggish prose and pithy appraisals are bound provoke even the most reticent of seminar students to lively discussion. (And if not, there’s no hope for them!)

In this way, we can effectively mine the book’s many disparate treasures, either as pearls of wisdom, stumbling blocks to interpretation, or even as occasional eccentric perspectives inviting refutation. Looking for a stylish preliminary exam question? Quote one of Boyle’s more controversial apercus followed merely by the words “agree or disagree” – at least until the author himself gives us much more reason to do one or the other.

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