INTRODUCTION TO GERMAN LITERATURE, 1871–1990

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Malcolm Humble and Raymond Furness

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Preface

To write a history of the literature of the German-speaking peoples of the last one hundred and twenty years, from the foundation of the Second Reich under Bismarck to the breaching of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent reunification of Germany in 1990, is by no means an easy task. For the journey is a momentous one, and the literary responses to the vicissitudes of modern German history are manifold and complex. The literature of the *Gründerzeit* will reflect or reject the values of Wilhelmine Germany; the experiments of the Naturalists, and the cultivation of aestheticism which followed them, both owe much to the awareness of international trends; the explosion of Expressionism, that 'gash of fire across the world' of which Paul Celan spoke, is a major German contribution. The literary and cultural achievements of the Weimar period are acknowledged to be of outstanding merit; the jejune and eccentric offerings of the Third Reich betray, in contrast to the writings of *Exilliteratur*, a Germanness both sterile and banal. The collapse of 1945 is an obvious caesura, and the literary historian has then to contend with ever more divergent literatures – those of the erstwhile German Democratic Republic, the Republic of Adenauer and his successors, of Austria and, to a lesser extent, of Switzerland. The theme of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* will loom large, as will the reaction to materialism, student disaffection and to terrorism. The literary response to the far-reaching events of 1989 and 1990 will conclude the volume, the response of those writers to the challenge facing Germany as the country moves towards an uncertain future. Many of the texts under discussion will reflect, then, the world around them – but there will also be a place for those writers who seek inwardness and utopias (or dystopias) in their aesthetic re-enactments.

It was Franz Kafka who demanded that a book be an axe to break open the frozen sea within us. And axes the German literature of the last century or so will provide aplenty, some to wield, others to grind. The uncertainties, restless energies and tortuous attempts at

self-definition of the German-speaking peoples of the twentieth century will provide many fascinating formulations. And as the century nears its end it may well be seen that the German contribution to world literature has perhaps made the most striking impact.

The authors of this book have attempted to give a survey of the major figures and of those works which, in their opinion, are the most significant. They have for the most part eschewed quotations in German and also cumbersome footnotes in order that the reader may be presented with an unimpeded and lucid narrative. Although we have been guided by our personal knowledge and judgement, our work would not have been possible without resort to the many publications on the history of twentieth-century German literature which have recently appeared, many of them supplying new emphases, and which are listed in the bibliography. The present volume is in part a reflection of the sifting process undertaken and the critical conspectus developed in these volumes, to which acknowledgement is due. Because the view which emerges from these works conforms to present-day reading patterns, it can be claimed that most of the texts referred to, with the exception of the literature of the Third Reich, are generally available in book-shops and libraries in German-speaking countries and that a good many have been translated into English.

We may reasonably be accused of having given the literature of German-speaking Switzerland short shrift. Faced with the decision whether or not to include a consideration of it, we settled for the compromise of placing the two major figures of post-1945 Swiss literature, Frisch and Dürrenmatt, within the context of developments elsewhere.

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