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Peter Gay
WEIMAR CULTURE
THE OUTSIDER AS INSIDER

W. W. Norton & Company New York London
The Weimar Republic had a short, hectic, and fascinating life. It was born on November 9, 1918, when the German Empire collapsed after four years of war and Emperor Wilhelm II was preparing to flee into exile in the Netherlands; it was murdered on January 30, 1933, when President Paul von Hindenburg, no longer at the height of his powers, appointed the charismatic leader of the National Socialist party, Adolf Hitler, chancellor of the country. As the brief history of the republic appended to this text documents (p. 147), it was a time of almost continuous political upheaval, of brave efforts at stability steadily undermined by economic ups and downs—mostly downs—sabotaged on the right by antidemocratic forces and on the left by Communists following orders from Moscow. At the same time, the Weimar Republic was a breathless era of cultural flowering that drew the world’s attention to German dance, German architecture, German filmmaking, German fiction, German theater, German art and music. The republic provided clusters of excitement way out of proportion to the mere fourteen years of its life.

The contrast between these political struggles and this cultural creativity, to say nothing of the sheer volume of innovation in the arts and letters, has thrown almost insurmountable obstacles in the historian’s way. The bibliography I have compiled for this book amply attests that there was abundant material for the student of the Weimar Republic, both primary sources and secondary treatments. But it is telling that when I started to research the republic, there were no comprehensive studies of its cultural life. The general his-
"On a hot spring noon of the year 1913, a young student was walking through the main street of the town of Heidelberg. He had just crossed the Brunngässlein and noticed how the customary stream of pedestrians who usually strolled to the University and back from the Ludwigplatz, in casual noisy conversation and irregular groups, on sidewalk and in the street, now were crawling lazily over the red-hot pavement, exhausted by the unaccustomed heat. As all at once these tired people seemed to pull themselves together; with elastic carriage, light step, a solitary man came walking along—all stepped aside that nothing might encumber his progress, and, as though floating, as though winged, he turned the corner, toward the Wredeplatz.

The spectator stood motionless, rooted to the spot. A breath from a higher world had brushed him. He no longer knew what had happened, hardly where he was. Was it a man who had stepped through the crowd? But he was distinguished from all the men among whom he had walked, by an unconscious loftiness and an easy power, so that beside him all pedestrians appeared like pale larvae, like soulless stick figures. Was it a god who had divided the bustling throng and hastened, with easy step, to other shores? But he had worn man's clothing, though of an unusual kind: a thin yellow silk jacket fluttered around his slender body; a large hat sat on his head, strangely light and alien, and thick brown hair welled up under it. And in his hand
Walther Rathenau at Cannes in early 1922

German foreign minister and martyr to right-wing assassins in 1922, Rathenau, aesthete, millionaire, statesman, Utopian, and Jew, reveals something of his problematic personality in this photograph.
there twirled a small, thin cane—was it the staff of Mercury, was it a human switch? And the countenance? The spectator recalled single features only indistinctly; they were chiseled, and the pallor of the cheeks contributed to arousing the impression of strangeness, statuefulness, divinity. And the eyes? Suddenly the spectator knew: it was a beam from these eyes that had enchanted him; quick as lightning a look had darted toward him, had penetrated his innermost being, and had strolled on with a slight, fleeting smile. And now the certainty arose: if it was a man, then—Stefan George.\(^1\)

It was indeed Stefan George, poet and seer, leader of a tight, humorless, self-congratulatory coterie of young men, a modern Socrates who held his disciples with a fascination at once erotic and spiritual—though this Socrates, who picked his collection of Alcibiades at least in part for their looks, was handsomer than his antique model. Stefan George was king of a secret Germany, a hero looking for heroes in an unheroic time. The impression he made on Edgar Salin in 1913, an impression the young man recorded on that day, was not at all unusual; there was a certain type of German to whom George was simply irresistible.

Stefan George died in voluntary Swiss exile in 1933, unwilling to lend his prestige to the triumphant Nazis whom he despised as ghastly caricatures of his elusive ideal. Friedrich Gundolf, his best-known disciple, the handsomest of his young men and the most productive, had died before him, in 1931, but most of the others survived him, some as Nazis, some as the victims of the Nazis, some in sullen silence, some in exile. Sorcerer’s apprentices, they could not exorcise the spirits they had helped call up.

Like most of the elements making up the Weimar spirit, the George circle, too, antedated the Republic, and drew on sources both German and foreign. Born in 1868, George had turned away from a culture he despised, to Baudelaire, cursed poet cursing his time, to Mallarmé, experimenter, musician in words, and prophet, and to German out-

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\(^1\) Edgar Salin, *Um Stefan George: Erinnerung und Zeugnis* (2nd ed., 1954), 11–12. Salin insists that this portrait was not a later elaboration, but based on a letter written that day. *Ibid.*, 303.
siders—to Hölderlin, the tendentious classicist, and to Nietzsche, the vehement advocate of a new pagan aristocracy. In his journal of poetry and polemics, the *Blätter für die Kunst*, founded in 1892, and in his carefully staged conversations with his young men, Stefan George developed his program and sought an audience for his delicately chiseled poetry. His task, as he saw it, was to perpetuate cultural values—the George circle expended much energy expounding Goethe and translating Shakespeare and Dante—and to renew the aristocratic sense of life. It was Nietzsche’s task: to be the good European, presiding over a transvaluation of values. But unlike Nietzsche, George did not choose to be alone; it was the heart of his method to build a secret empire for the sake of the new Reich to come, to find strength and possible inspiration in warm friendships and among the choice spirits of the past.

It was an elitist program pushed to the very limits of elitism; the secret Germany was a club to which new members were elected, and for which they were trained, one by one. Many called, few were chosen; some, like Hofmannsthali, fitted into the circle briefly, then left. It was an exclusive, solemn little troop—survivors report gaiety, but the hundreds of photographs of the George circle show not a smile among them—dedicated to service of the master, who repaid his beloved followers with emotional verses of—to mere outsiders—embarrassing warmth. Yet for all his frenetic appeal to quality and to the choice nature of the individual specimen, for all his cultism, Stefan George himself was not a racist. Gundolf’s wartime fervor left him cold. Walter Mehring’s savage portrait of George, therefore, misses the mark: Mehring shows him playing the harp on the Olympus of Teutonic war poets, while his “geliebten Siegfried-Lustknaben”—those lovely boys who served the pleasures of older men—marched off to battle. In fact, George feared and loathed the war precisely because it was killing off his young men. These German prophets—gravediggers of the Republic all, whether consciously or unconsciously—were often remarkably intelligent about the stupidity of their competitors: George about the patriots, and Oswald Spengler, who was stupid about so much else, about George. “The fundamental weakness of George,” he wrote in 1917, “(quite apart from the fact that the ‘circle’ has turned him into a sacred fool) is his lack of intelligence.”

However grievous this lack, the George circle was incredibly busy. It did translations, polished verses, published esoteric and polemical essays on literary criticism, cultivated meaningful eccentricities in dress and typography, and, perhaps most important, combed history for worthy subjects—for select spirits who, had they lived in Stefan George’s time, would surely have belonged to Stefan George’s circle. Gundolf celebrated Caesar, Goethe, and Shakespeare, Ernst Bertram discovered new meaning in Nietzsche, Max Kommerell exalted Goethe and Herder into leaders of culture. These biographers were performing rituals; they did not analyze, they proclaimed their subjects, treating them as founders, as judges, as supermen shrouded in myth, who, through their lives, shamed twentieth-century Germany, that new iron age. In 1930 Eckart Kehr noted and deplored a “Plutarch Renaissance,” and cited Gundolf’s frenetic biography of Caesar as a leading example of this “historical belles-lettresism.” The popularity of Plutarch among the George circle, and indeed among a wider public, seemed to him symptomatic of disorientation; Plutarch had written of gods and heroes, of gigantic individuals, often inaccurately, and now modern Plutarchs, with the same contempt for precision, were offering a hungry public new giants to worship. Emil Ludwig, and other best-selling biographers of the Ullstein world, smoothly fitted into this pattern; Ludwig calmly announced that he preferred graceful, unreliable storytelling to the cold accuracy of the expert. The biographers in the George circle were often themselves experts, but they did not choose experts as their subjects; they chose whole men.

The most notable biography produced in the George circle was Ernst Kantorowicz’s book on the great thirteenth-century Hohen-

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4 “Der neue Plutarch: Die ‘historische Belletristik,’ die Universität und die Demokratie,” *Die Gesellschaft*, VII, part 2 (1930), 180–188; the quotations from Ludwig are on 185, 187 (see *Der Primat der Innenpolitik*, 269–278).
Germany much palatable nourishment: Kantorowicz's Frederick II is the father of the Renaissance, a ruler rivaling the stature of Alexander the Great. He revived the classics, attained dizzying heights of the human spirit, embodied primeval forces, was strong, alert, vigorous despite all his intellect, and in his combination of qualities superior even to Caesar and Napoleon, German to his core. He was dead and yet alive, waiting to redeem a German people as yet incapable of grasping his true semidivine greatness. Kantorowicz did more than report medieval legends; his language, in its hyperbole, its shimmering vagueness, its ecstatic approval, conveys a highly tendentious—I am tempted to say erotic—engagement with its subject, and implies belief in these legends as deep truths, relevant to a suffering Germany. Kantorowicz put much reliable history into his biography, but that made his myth all the more persuasive to the educated, all the more dangerous to the Republic. It was history as political poetry.

It is impossible to measure the following for such books, or of the George Kreis as a whole; George's disciples exaggerated their influence. But there were many who found it seductive; it was a fresh wind in the stuffy atmosphere of the universities, and an exciting alternative to the routine cant of the politicians. Theodor Heuss later recalled that "the great works of historical prose that came out of the Stefan George circle became very important to me." Heuss never felt any real enthusiasm for the master himself; all the esoteric mumbo-jumbo (Drum und Dran) of the circle, all the "self-conscious verbal constructions" of its poetry, disturbed him. But, he confessed, the "works of Friedrich Gundolf, from his magnificent Shakespeare book on," and the historical writings of Wolters, Kommerell, and the others meant a great deal to him: "What was decisive in my estimate was not what one could learn from George, though that was not negligible, but the high standards his circle imposed." If even Heuss was taken into camp—and the hysterical bombast of these biographies is nearly intolerable today—the seductiveness of the George style must have been nothing less than overwhelming.

5 "Das neueste Lebensbild Kaiser Friedrichs II." Historische Zeitschrift, CXXXVI (1932), 441–475.

6 Heuss, Erinnerungen, 354.
II

While his competition with the dead was formidable, among Stefan George's living competitors there was only one poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, who could rival him in influence. Unlike George, Rilke was unencumbered by a formal coterie; one could join the Rilke cult by simply reading him. And everyone read him. Young soldiers went to their death with his verses on their lips; all the youth movements, which played such a prominent role in German life before and during Weimar, made him into one of their favorite poets; they recited him by the campfire and printed him in their magazines. He greatly impressed his fellow artists; Thomas Mann recognized him, "of course," as a "lyrical phenomenon of the highest rank." In his last years, and after his death in 1926, Rilke became the dubious beneficiary of German literary criticism, a kind of writing that (with rare and honorable exceptions) was less a criticism than a celebration, intuitive in method and overblown in rhetoric, a making and staking of grandiose claims, a kind of writing mired in sensibility and pseudo-philosophical mystery-making. Rilke, as Walter Muschg has caustically but justly said, became "the idol of a generation without men." The publication of his letters, "most of them written, with violet ink, to ladies," called forth a "herd of male and female enthusiasts—Schwärmer und Schwärmerinnen," until last the "Rilke-fever grew into a world-wide fanatical sect." But however foreigners might respond, it was worse at home. Only a handful of radicals ridiculed his preciosity, and lampooned his sentimentalizing of the poor—"Have you ever shivered in an attic?" Kurt Tucholsky asked—while nearly everyone else deified him. Rilke's famous late poems, the Sonnets to Orpheus and the Duino Elegies, poured out in February 1922 in a creative fit, are difficult, "in parts barely comprehensible in the original," and this made them into "the ideal support for amateurish, pseudo-religious needs which appropriated Rilke and distorted him into a kind of lyrical Rasputin behind whom the poet disappeared." Inevitably, Rilke was raised into the heavens as a seer and a saint, "a bringer of a message and founder of a religion," a unique figure who had conquered and discredited the intellectuality that had dominated the West for a millennium. This, concludes Muschg, in a happy if untranslatable phrase, was "youth-movement mysticism—Wanderungsmystik."9

These are savage judgments, but they must not be dismissed as the hindsight of a disenchanted observer seeking for causes of the Nazi triumph over Germany. Contemporary sources offer striking confirmation. On February 20, 1927—and I shall confine myself to this representative instance—Stefan Zweig gave a speech in Rilke's memory, "Farewell to Rilke," in Munich. He spoke at length, and with a flowery hyperbole surprising even for a memorial meeting. But then he was mourning a poet—a Dichter. Rilke, Zweig told his listeners, was a true Dichter: "This word, this primeval-sacred, this bronze-weighty and highly immodest word, which our questionable age confounds all too easily with the lesser and uncertain notion of the author—Schriftsteller—the mere writer, fully applies to him. He, Rainer Maria Rilke, he was a poet, once again and anew, in that pure and perfect sense in which Hölderlin invokes him, the 'divinely reared, himself inactive and slight, but looked upon by the ether, and pious.'" He was a poet full-time: "We know of no hour in which he was not a Dichter"; every letter he wrote, every gesture he made, his smile and his handwriting, testify to his mission. And it was this "inviolable certainty of his mission that made us his, from our youth on, and reverential to him." How did he begin to deserve this "illustrious name" of Dichter? Let no one touch upon this mystery. Perhaps it was "the last reverberation of ancient-aristocratic blood, tired after many generations, unrolling itself once more in this, the last of them"—though, in fact, Rilke's claims to old, noble ancestry were wholly imaginary and pure snobbery. But whatever the truth, Zweig mused,

7 Mann to B. Fucik, April 15, 1932. Briefe, 1889–1926, 316.
no one can fully explain the origins of a poet, “that incomprehensible stranger among men, in whom the thousand-year-old language rises once again, so new, as though it had not been chattered to death by millions of lips and ground down in millions of letters, until the day He comes, the One, who looks upon all things past and emerging with his surprised, his colorfully-enveloping, his dawnlike look." No, Zweig went on, “mundane causalities can never explain how, in the midst of thousands of dull beings only one becomes a poet,” but Rilke did become that poet, and there was no one in the audience who did not carry in his unconscious some stanza, or a word, from his work, some “breath of his music.” It had been nothing less than “marvellous” for the younger generation to see the growth of this poet, rising from timid beginnings to the height of lyrical poetry, then rising above that, twice again, to start anew, ever more heroically, seeking God in ever-widening circles. Only now, after his death, had the significance of his last difficult poems been revealed: “In earlier days, ourselves surprised, we could hardly grasp the meaning contained in those last poems”—but the very difficulty that would later strike Musch in a crippling defect was, to Stefan Zweig, a divine gift. Rilke, he said, no longer addressed mere living men in the Duino Elegies; he was holding converse “with the other, with the beyond of things and feelings.”

These effusions are instructive because they are not simply a mechanical eulogy; they stood, in all their calculated imprecision, all their unashamed hyperbole, for a style of thinking that many Germans recognized, enjoyed, and, in fact, found indispensable in talk about poets and poetry.

To Rilke’s credit it must be said that he was the most reluctant of prophets, and when he issued warnings to his correspondents, he was not adopting the seductive pose that seeks to attract while appearing to repel; he was being faithful to his own convictions. He was besieged by letters from strangers. “What letters!” he wrote to a friend in the summer of 1921. “There are so many people who expect from me—I don’t know quite what—help, advice; from me, who finds himself so perplexed before the pressing urgencies of life! And even though I know they deceive themselves, that they are mistaken—still I feel (and I don’t think it’s out of vanity!) tempted to communicate some of my experiences to them—some fruits of my long solitude.” There are lonely girls and young women, and “then all those young working people, most of them revolutionaries, who have come out the state prisons disoriented, and blunder into ‘literature’ by composing intoxicated and evil poems. What shall I say to them? How can I lift up their desperate hearts... ?”

For all his self-conscious isolation, all his careful cultivation of European aristocrats, Rilke had a social conscience and a sense of his own limits. And he was thoroughly aware of the differences between life and poetry. He saw (as he put it in a letter of 1922) great danger in the confusions of his age, which “had so often understood the call of art as a call to art”; thus the artistic activity of the time, far from positively affecting life, had called more and more of the young away from life. Clearly Rilke was a better man than his disciples, who wanted little more than to worship him and glean from his poems a way of life and a religion, and the truth about him was on the whole more attractive than the legends that formed around him so rapidly. Rilke could have applied to himself what he said about Rodin, whom he had known intimately and for whom he had worked for some time: “Fame, after all, is no more than the quintessence of all the misunderstandings collecting round a new name.”

The truth about Rilke was that he was a poet of remarkable powers—critics of all persuasions agree that he extended the range of the German language and elicited new melodies from it, that he was a master of metaphor and striking imagery. And, especially in his early years, he saw his poetry as the fruit of hard work and the tireless

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gathering of experience. "Verses," he wrote in his novel *The Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge*, "are not, as people think, feelings (those one has early enough)—they are experiences. For the sake of a verse one must see many cities, men, and things, one must know the animals, feel how birds fly, and know the gesture with which the little flowers open in the morning."¹⁴ One must know much more: Rilke's assignment to the poet as consumer of experience is very demanding; it includes the knowledge of children and of the dying, of nights of love and of listening to the sea. True, in his later years Rilke was more ready than before to credit inspiration; he had hallucinations and heard voices, but even the fantastic outpouring of poetry in February 1922 was the compressed expression of lines and images he had been carrying in his head, and noted in his notebooks, for as long as ten years. The late Rilke was still working hard, but his work had become largely unconscious.

And the truth about Rilke, finally, was that he had no system. Like many writers who write a great deal and without systematic intentions, he contradicted himself. Like most poets, who write after all to make poetry and not philosophy, he embodied attitudes but belonged to no school; his magnificent gift for language paved the way to music rather than to logic. One could read Rilke just for pleasure, bathing in his images; one could read Rilke as the poet of alienation, or as the celebrant of a pagan universe in which human feelings and inanimate things, love and suffering, life and death, compose themselves into a harmonious whole. This last—the harmonizing of life and death—was particularly prominent in his mind. "In my *Elegies,*" Rilke wrote in an important letter just a year before his own death, "affirmation of life and affirmation of death are shown to be one."¹⁵ Indeed, he had made this point, powerfully, in the first of his elegies: Angels, it is said, often do not know whether they walk among the living or the dead.

¹⁴ Interestingly enough, Stefan Zweig quotes these lines in his speech ("Abschied von Rilke," 62–63), without drawing any serious conclusions from them.

¹⁵ Rilke to Witold Hulewicz, November 13, 1925. *Briefe,* II, 489. (See Hans Egon Holthusen, *Rainer Maria Rilke in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten* [1958], 152.)

Yet even this preoccupation was a purely personal search rather than legislation for others. Rilke's private pantheism could be enjoyed; it did not need to be imitated. In his poems, one thing became something else with such ease and yet, with his discipline and precision, such lucidity—cities hold out their arms to the traveler, a man becomes not like but actually is the sea—that everything appears animated with the same breath and joins in a single organic unity. Rilke had what Freud said he did not have: the oceanic feeling. This equipped him to write lyrics, and letters, of great beauty, to paint verbal pictures and compose melodious lines which, as Stefan Zweig rightly said, remained unforgettable. That should have been enough, but to his enthusiasts, swamped in spirituality, it was not enough.

### III

For all their commitment to modernity—and Rilke in particular, once he had found his own voice, joined the company of other great moderns like Valéry and T. S. Eliot—Stefan George and Rainer Maria Rilke were haunted by their German past. They dutifully, and sometimes sincerely, admired the prescribed classics of the Goethe epoch, but their real discovery was Hölderlin, nearly forgotten until they rescued him from oblivion. Hölderlin appeared in histories of German literature as the acquaintance of Goethe and Schiller, an interesting lyrical poet who had written a strange epistolary novel, *Hyperion*, and the fragment of a tragedy, *The Death of Eupemocles*, and who belonged, rather vaguely, among the Graecophiles who had

flourished in Germany in the classical age. It was also known that he had done most of his poetic work before or around 1800, and had then broken down and vegetated on in pathetic madness until 1843. He had few readers, though distinguished ones; but neither Dillthey nor Nietzsche could bring him back into the consciousness of the German public—that was to be done by his ecstatic worshipers in the twentieth century.

Perhaps the most intrepid pioneer of the Hölderlin Renaissance was Norbert von Hellingrath, a faithful member of the Stefan George circle, who rediscovered some of Hölderlin's late works, reinterpreted Hölderlin's difficult hymns, and started a critical edition of Hölderlin's writings. Stefan George himself, as Edgar Salin puts it in the approved manner, was too mature to receive Hölderlin as a "shaping and forming and coloring power," but he did "experience the profound affinity" of the newly discovered poems: "It was as if a curtain had been drawn from the holy of holies and the still unutterable offered itself to view." In other words, George and his followers read Hölderlin with enthusiasm, reprinted him in their collections, and made propaganda in his behalf.

Rilke, as it happened, supported the George Kreis in this work. He had come to Hölderlin in large measure through Hellingrath, whom he had met in 1910, and whose work he followed closely; by 1914 he could apostrophize the magnificent Hölderlin—"du Herrlicher"—in some exalted verses, and thus spread the good news to a wider public. The public was ready during, and even more after, the war. In the Weimar period, literati like Stefan Zweig further popularized him in biographical-critical essays, while the scholars did their part with their dissertations. For his readers in the youth movements, Hölderlin was a preacher of integration in a world of fragmentation; time and again they would repeat Hyperion's lament: "It is a hard saying, and yet I say it because it is the truth: I can conceive of no people more dismembered than the Germans. You see workmen but no human beings, thinkers but no human beings, priests but no human beings, masters and servants, youths and staid people, but no human beings." Such sentiments acquired peculiar poignancy in the 1920s, when Germany was, if not literally dismembered by the Peace of Versailles, certainly separated from some German-speaking territories. Besides, the story of Hyperion, a modern Greek who participates in an eighteenth-century rebellion against Turkish rule, appealed to those Germans deeply resentful of the "foreign oppression" under which, they thought, their country labored during the Weimar period. Other readers found Hölderlin deeply satisfying in other ways; the George enthusiasts, joined by the philosopher Heidegger, appreciated Hölderlin's exalted view of the poet's mission, his call for a new god, and, by implication, a new Germany. And the George circle liked nothing better than Hölderlin's discovery of the kinship between classical Greece and modern Germany, their fateful link; as one of them wrote, they gloried in "Hölderlin's outbroad proclamation, incomprehensible to a whole century, of the essential Greek-German—Griechendeutschs." But Hölderlin was no one's private property; he was, as Felix Gilbert remembers, "the one German literary figure whom all German intellectuals" admired, "from the right" all the way "to the extreme left"; and what they especially admired was his "appeal for a new wholeness of life."

Here, indeed, was the secret of Hölderlin's appeal to a beset and bewildered twentieth-century Germany: Hölderlin had been one of the first to state rather darkly what was to become a poetic, philosophical, sociological, and political commonplace—that the modern world was fragmenting man, breaking him apart, estranging him from his society and his real inner nature. The hero of Hölderlin's Empedocles is, in his author's explicit words, "a mortal enemy of all one-sided existence," inclined "by his temperament and his philosophy" to a "hatred of civilization—Kulturhass," miserable and suffering even amid pleasant circumstances precisely because they

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are particular, not universal. When he leaps into Aetna, he chooses his “free death” quite explicitly, as a privilege open only to beings like himself, and as a testimony to the wholeness that is no longer possible. For Empedocles, as for his author, suicide is a brooding preoccupation, almost, one might say, a way of life.

This kind of feeling about the world, in which, as with Rilke later, life and death are intertwined and almost indistinguishable, had an enormous appeal to the poetic souls of Weimar. Hölderlin’s madness—he lived longer in the night of madness than in the short daylight of sanity—was, to his most devoted twentieth-century readers, another form of death, and not some mere mental breakdown but a commentary on civilization and a confirmation of his “philosophy.” This alone would have made the twentieth-century revival of Hölderlin significant, but beyond this, it was part of a widespread passion for such disinterments. The Hölderlin revival was accompanied by the revival, among others, of Kleist and Büchner. The late Wilhelminian Empire, it seems, specialized in such rediscoveries, as though the cultural ground of its own day were treacherous, not a place on which to stand or build. And in this, too, Weimar culture was a continuation and confirmation of a movement that had begun before, following the rediscoveries of the 1900s to their logical or emotional conclusion.

Kleist was hardly a forgotten man; his stories found their readers in the nineteenth century, and his plays a few, though not many, producers. Nietzsche coupled Kleist with Hölderlin as a victim of pretentious cultivation—that cursed German Bildung—as practically all later writers would couple Kleist with Hölderlin as eminently deserving, and at last slowly receiving, his due. It was not until after Nietzsche ceased writing, until the turn of the century, that scholars began to gather Kleist’s writings into dependable critical editions, study Kleist’s life through all the surviving documents, and debate Kleist’s meaning for his time and, more important, their own. As the dramatist and critic Hermann Bahr, a lifelong champion of Kleist,

put it in 1927: “During my childhood the memory of Kleist had been almost extinguished; in school we barely heard his name: it was not part of ‘Bildung’ to know him. His time came only after 1870. Scherer and his pupils remembered him. Otto Brahm wrote about him and did not forget him after he took over the management of the Deutsches Theater. But despite all this, Kleist did not yet become popular. Only during the world war, indeed only after the war, did the nation begin to recollect him, about the same time that there was the first glimmer of a Goethe-dawn. To the new youth which had experienced the war, Goethe was too cold, too stiff; for them, he did not have enough chaos in him. This youth felt itself gravely troubled by an experience it could not grasp, and, demanding clarification of an unjust misery, it found consolation in Kleist, who, after all, continually presses for clarification of his bewildering fate. Indeed, more than that: in his works Kleist had given shape and expression to a human type—the Prussian—of which the nation became aware only through him and in him. He survives not merely as a poet, but his poetry walks in our midst, incarnate.”

This is extravagant but not far from the truth. In the Weimar period Kleist scholarship became a passion, the cult a crusade. The great directors of the Weimar theater revived Kleist’s plays, trying out a whole spectrum of interpretations ranging from the psychoanalytical to the patriotic, the sentimental to the Expressionist. Playwrights and critics piled up essays: Thomas Mann, Stefan Zweig, and others like them obsessively returned to Kleist, almost as if he haunted them. During the fourteen years of the Weimar Republic, at a rough count over thirty books were published on Kleist—more, it would seem, than had been published in the whole preceding century. In 1920 Kleist received the supreme accolade: a society founded to honor his memory. The Kleist-Gesellschaft could boast of a most distinguished and diversified group of officers and sponsors, including the greatest living classicist, Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, famous Dichter

like Gerhart Hauptmann and Hugo von Hofmannsthal and younger radical playwrights like Walter Hasenclever, the philosopher Ernst Cassirer, and the best-known, highly popular Impressionist painter, Max Liebermann. A group so varied needed to agree only on its worship of Kleist, and on its conviction that "To stand by Kleist is to be German."\textsuperscript{22}

The only question that remained was just what it meant to stand by Kleist—which Kleist? Some readers found in Kleist the tormented Christian, others the aristocrat out of his time, still others a rebel; Thomas Mann, in contrast to all these readers, enjoyed the delicious humor of Kleist's neoclassical comedy \textit{Amphitryon}.\textsuperscript{23} The Nazis claimed Kleist as the pure strong German, the George circle as the poet of the lonely elite, the Communists as an early revolutionary, while his descendant Hans Jürgen von Kleist protested against all such distortions and insisted on his ancestor's right to be read, quite simply, as the "singer of the war of liberation."\textsuperscript{24} Kleist's work was singularly plastic: everyone made of it what he needed. True, in 1925 Walter Muschg thought he detected signs of dawning understanding, but the understanding he describes was merely the old enthusiasm brought up to date. Muschg disdainfully dismissed the publications of the Kleist-Gesellschaft as "erudite poverty," but thought that there was real hope in "the artists among the scholars" and the "thoughtfully inclined among the poets"; both were at last replacing the "amateurish park-statue" with a worthier monument. "Kleist," he wrote, making the inescapable pairing, "by Hölderlin's side, seems to be on the way to becoming the idol of those Germans who passionately seek entrance to the deepest secret of their nation."\textsuperscript{25}

This was meant to be reassuring; actually it was ominous. For the so-called better interpreters of Kleist only gave new respectability to the love affair with death that loomed so large over the German mind.

\textsuperscript{22} "Aufruf" of the Kleist-Gesellschaft, February 1922, in \textit{ibid.}, 410.
\textsuperscript{23} Thomas Mann, "Kleist's \textit{Amphitryon}" (1926), now in Mann, \textit{Essays of Three Decades} (tr. H. T. Lowe-Porter, 1947), 202–240.
\textsuperscript{24} "Kleist und die Kleists," \textit{Vossische Zeitung}, October 20, 1927, in \textit{Kleists Nachruhm}, 434.
\textsuperscript{25} Muschg in the \textit{Neue Zürcher Zeitung}, September 13, 1925, in \textit{ibid.}, 419.

Fritz Strich, presumably a sober literary historian, saw Kleist's tragedy, \textit{The Prince of Homburg}, as a demonstration that only he is a hero who "possesses ripeness for death, readiness for death"; for its author, this tragedy was destiny, "converting lust for life into a blissful wish for death—Lebenssucht in Todesseligkeit." And Kleist's suicide was, for Strich, an acting out in life what the tragedy had taught on the stage; his suicide was "his last creation."\textsuperscript{26} In 1925—the very year that Muschg found ground for encouragement—Stefan Zweig portrayed Kleist as the poet fighting with his demon. "Kleist's life," he wrote, in full agreement with Strich, "is not life, but solely a hunt for the end, a gigantic hunt with its animal-like intoxication of blood and sensuality, of cruelty and horror." For Kleist, culmination was also conclusion; that masterful tragedy could have been written only by one consecrated to death: "His voluntary early death is his masterpiece quite as much as the \textit{Prince Frederick of Homburg}."\textsuperscript{27} If this murkiness dominated the critics filled with the spirit of Weimar, the sentiments animating Kleist's right-wing readers can be imagined. Only three things were clear about the Kleist crusade: its intensity, its confusion, and its exaltation of irrationality—its blissful death wish.

In contrast, the Büchner revival was always a republican, or a left-wing affair; whatever ultimate philosophical meaning could be forced on Büchner's plays, his sympathy with the poor, detestation of authoritarianism, and tough-minded realism about society made it impossible for patriots and reactionaries to use him. True, Arnold Zweig, himself a consistent radical, added Büchner to that inevitable pair Kleist and Hölderlin, as one of the three "saccumbing and victorious youths of German literature,"\textsuperscript{28} but, at least in Weimar days, Büchner clearly belonged to democrats, socialists and Communists.

Unlike Kleist, Büchner had been almost wholly forgotten after his early death in 1837, at the age of twenty-three, a young revolutionary.

\textsuperscript{26} Fritz Strich, \textit{Deutsche Klassik und Romantik} (1922), in \textit{ibid.}, 416.
\textsuperscript{27} Stefan Zweig, "Heinrich von Kleist," now in \textit{Baumeister der Welt} (1951), 251, 300.
\textsuperscript{28} Answer to circular questionnaire, "Wie stehst du zu Kleist?" \textit{Oder-Zeitung}, October 18, 1927, in \textit{Kleists Nachruhm}, 440.
in exile. A single play, *Danton’s Death*, was alone among his works to be published in his lifetime; his other writings, the nearly complete play *Woyzeck*, the short novel *Lenz*, and the comedy *Leonce and Lena*—a remarkably large and splendidly realized body of work for one so young—came out later and aroused practically no interest at all. With one or two exceptions, no one read Büchner for decades; the first reliable edition had to wait until 1879, and it was not until the late 1880s that the young Gerhart Hauptmann discovered Büchner and shared his excitement with the public.

At first Büchner was neglected because he aroused no response; later he was suppressed because the response he might arouse was judged to be dangerous: in 1891 a Social Democratic newspaper in Berlin printed *Danton’s Death*, and the editor spent four months in prison for the offense; the Berlin Freie Volksbühne announced the same play in 1890, but cautiously waited for twelve years before it dared to give a performance. The authorities had little use for a playwright whom the rebel Wedekind, to whom nothing was sacred, had taken up. But by 1900 the ban was broken; producers began to mount Büchner’s plays, and between 1909 and 1923 there was room and demand for five editions of his collected works.²⁹

Once again the Republic completed what the late Empire had begun. Carl Zuckmayer recalls that with the outbreak of the revolution, when the youth, filled with talent, excitement, and great need, looked for figures it could truly admire, Büchner became “the patron saint of this youth; a magnificent youth, rebellious, vital, and penetrated by the awareness of its public responsibility.”³⁰ One version of a Büchner play, Albarn Berg’s opera *Wozzeck*, first performed in 1925, was doubly radical: it used Schönberg’s twelve-tone system and *Sprechgesang* in combination with more conventional musical means, and it had as its hero—or antihero—one of Büchner’s most moving characters, the poor ignorant soldier who is humiliated by his betters


³⁰ *Als Wür’s ein Stück von mir* (1966), 272.

and betrayed by his girl, and who ends up committing murder and suicide. The fame of Berg’s opera gave fame to Büchner’s play. For their part, Expressionist playwrights like Ernst Toller and the young Bertolt Brecht of *Baal* filled their plays with reminiscences of the playwright they enormously admired; Brecht, said the powerful critic Alfred Kerr, is an epigone, a “Büchneroid.”³¹ Like Hölderlin and Kleist, like George and Rilke, but in his own manner, the *Dichter* Büchner was a living force in the world of Weimar.

IV

It is easy to show that the *Dichter* occupied an exalted position in Germany, but hard to diagnose what this meant. After all, the passion for poetry did not make all Germans into militarists or reactionaries; if, in August 1914, in a rapturous moment he soon regretted, Rilke could invoke the god of war and the suffering he would bring to a waiting world, there were other poets, almost as eloquent as Rilke, who damned the war and the warmakers with all the poetic power at their command. If right-wing nationalists had their poets, so did the Social Democrats. And if many saw the poet as a sublime prophet and lawgiver, there were others who saw him as the critic of society, the realist who told society how it looked to him, and the goad who might seek to improve it. What is more, the effect of poetry was neither universal nor uniform; what might arouse the adolescent to a frenzy of enthusiasm might move the adult to cool analysis or leave him in puzzlement or boredom. In Weimar as elsewhere, men compartmentalized their minds and lives, and tough-minded, thoroughly political intellectuals like Franz Neumann could quote Hölderlin without making him into their guide in the world of party struggles.

Franz Werfel recalled the time of the First World War almost with

fondness as a time when "the word still had power," and the word he meant was the word of the poet, the sacred figure one could safely entrust with authority. But things were not so simple. Men of the word tend to overestimate the power of the word. It is an old illusion, left over from neoclassical theory, that poetry and the drama have immediate and direct effects, persuading the audience to action. But for many, even in Weimar, poetry and the theatre were entertaining or civilizing forces, with no, or only indirect and subtle, effects on conviction and conduct. Whatever poets might fear—or desire—poetry was not simply propaganda. Besides, as I have suggested, the kind of poet the Germans seemed to love most lent himself to conflicting interpretations, and could be recited with approval by members of many parties. And finally, even if the poet's message was unequivocal, it is by no means certain that this message molded the reader; it was just as likely that the reader sought the message he wanted and might have in any event found elsewhere, on nonpoetic grounds. Were not the poets more mirror than cause?

It is a hard question to answer, but this much is evident: both before the Weimar Republic and during it, poetry exercised a peculiar power over the German imagination. Certainly the Germans were not alone in worshipping poets, as they were not alone in forming powerful coteries held together by bonds of conviction or homosexual love; the affairs of the Bloomsbury circle suggest that when it came to sexual eccentricities among influential young men, graduates from Oxford were far more active, and far more secretive, than the George circle. But the secretiveness of the English, their outward conventionality, was at least in part their salvation: precisely because they were private, they influenced the public less—at least in this area of their activity—than the ostentatious cultists in Germany.

Yet, as the memoirs, heavily laden with testimony, show over and over again, the men of Weimar were particularly susceptible to poetry. In Prague young Willy Haas, who was to become a leading film critic and literary editor in the Berlin of the twenties, greeted the appearance of the equally young Walter Hasenclever as nothing less than "Friedrich Schiller's fiery youths . . . reborn." Martin Buber later confessed that when he first read Stefan George at eighteen, and then again at twenty-three, these were decisive discoveries for him, "two events unforgettable, perhaps incommunicable." Stefan Zweig records that Hugo von Hofmannsthal's recitations left his listeners shaken and silent. It was an ineffable, utterly fascinating phenomenon: "What can happen to a young generation more intoxicating than this: to feel near, physically near, the born, the pure, the sublime poet, whom one had only imagined in the legendary form of Hölderlin and Keats and Leopardi, unattainable and already half dream and vision?" The appearance of young Werfel and his Expressionist verses left a similar impression. And there were many others who found Goethe just as present, just as shaping an experience, as the recitations of some polished youth. "No contemporary Dichter or Denker," the journalist and biographer Gustav Mayer remembered, "not excepting Ibsen and Nietzsche, accompanied and guided my development more persistently than Goethe." Goaded by foreigners for dwelling on his Germanness—his Deutschtum—Mayer would reply by invoking the two Germanies: "I would tell them that it was not the spirit of Potsdam but the spirit of Weimar that made me a German." Goethe or Hofmannsthal, Hölderlin or Rilke, it did not matter; they were all contemporaries in the German pantheon.

Taken, then, in the extended sense in which the Germans use the word "Dichter," to embrace the writers of imaginative prose, Germany can be said to be the only country that could have taken seriously Shelley's famous sweeping dictum that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world"—how seriously appears from Friedrich Meinecke's last book, The German Catastrophe (1946) where, amid the rubble left by World War II, in the midst of shame

34 Quoted by Haas, *ibid.*, 180.
for unprecedented crimes, the aged historian sketches a “little wishful picture”: “In every German city and larger village,” he writes, “we should like to see in the future a community of like-minded friends of culture which I should like best to call Goethe Communities.” To these communities “would fall the task of conveying to the hearts of the listeners through sound the most vital evidences of the great German spirit, always offering the noblest music and poetry together.” So many libraries have been burned that it is only in such groups that the young may have “their first access to the imperishable poems of Hölderlin, Mörike, C. F. Meyer, and Rilke at one of those regular music and poetry festal hours of the Goethe Communities which we desire as a permanent institution everywhere among us—perhaps weekly at a late Sunday afternoon hour, and if at all possible in a church. The religious basis of our poetry justifies, yes demands, its being made clear by a symbolic procedure of this kind.” These readings should include selected, “right” prose, but “lyrical and thoughtful poetry” would definitely “form the kernel of such festal hours. Lyrics of the wonderful sort, reaching their peak in Goethe and Mörike where the soul becomes nature and nature the soul, and sensitive, thoughtful poetry like that of Goethe and Schiller.”

In the impressive literature of German self-accusation, I know of no passage more instructive and more pathetic than this. By blurring the boundaries between poetry and religion, Meinecke perpetuates that vague religiosity of the heart that had characterized so much German philosophizing since the end of the eighteenth century—since the fatal years when the poets and thinkers of the classical period thought it necessary to “overcome” the “shallow thinking” of the Enlightenment. Reading poetry in a church, at stated hours, is a notion symptomatic of an intellectual style that raises poetry to religious importance and degrades religion to poetic feeling, permitting devotees to feel cultured without being materialists, and pious without being saddled with particular Christian dogmas which, everyone knew, are mere superstitions. And what poetry? Goethe’s and Schiller’s above all—both profoundly unpolitical writers, the first through avoiding the subject, the second through treating it as an adjunct to heroic action. Goethe’s politics was apathy, Schiller’s tyrannicide; neither was a mode calculated to prepare men for parliamentary compromises; both, in calling for something higher than politics, helped to pave the way for something lower—barbarism. To treat poetry as an instrument of salvation was to prescribe a dubious medicine, since it had been one of the instruments of Germany’s perdition in the first place.

A century and a half before Meinecke offered this despairing recipe, Madame de Staël had called Germany the land of poets and thinkers—Dichter und Denker. In the years between Madame de Staël and Professor Meinecke, it had become the land where poets were elevated above thinkers or, rather, where thinkers were converted into poets, much to the detriment of thinking. One of Martin Heidegger’s recent interpreters unwittingly gives the game away: “There,” in Freiburg, Heidegger “lives, with Hellingrath’s edition of Hölderlin’s works. This closeness to Hölderlin is no accident but an essential key to an understanding of Heidegger’s own philosophy. For Hölderlin came from the same physical region, he faced the same spiritual problems, and he experienced more lucidly and bitterly the ultimate meaning of nothingness than any other person who could give expression to it in song. The parallel with Heidegger is close, indeed, if ‘thought’ is substituted for ‘song.’” Actually, the process went in precisely the opposite direction: song was substituted for thought.
