German Writing, American Reading

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CONCLUSION

The historian must indeed be superficial, who, in making a philosophical estimate of the units which together constitute the individuality of any age, ignores its domestic relations, as an important factor in the great sum whose mysteries he is endeavoring to solve.

—Mary Stuart Smith

IN 1877 the anonymous author of a review essay of German novels in the original German found repeated occasion to generalize about Germans as a people. Among these assertions, those concerning Germans’ failure to assimilate in America are particularly arresting. “That the peculiarities of German blood are not easily eradicated is patent to ordinary observation,” the reviewer maintained, continuing,

The Englishman or Irishman soon becomes absorbed into the body-politic, and the second generation are “more American than the Americans”; while the Germans, by their constantly recurring festivals of home origin, their observance of national and family anniversaries, with their frequent habit of costuming for balls and parties in garments, reminding them of their beloved Swabia, Bohemia or Westphalia, keep up those tender recollections which bind them to their native land and their relatives there. Whether from Berlin or Vienna, from the Danube or the Rhine, every German family strives to keep alive the memories, customs and speech of their fatherland.

As this reviewer saw it, German migrants maintained their foreignness in the midst of a majority culture that was separate from their own. For those uncomfortable with Germans in their midst, such separation might have been welcome, for there would thus be no mistaking who was German and who was not.
German domestic fiction as it was Americanized through translation, publication, packaging, marketing, reviewing, and repeated reading, however, told a different story, one of assimilation. If, as Amy Kaplan argues, mid-nineteenth-century American women novelists tended to support the redrawing of domestic borders against the foreign in their delineation of domestic space as both familial and national, Gilded Age American readers welcomed foreign fiction into their homes once it had become palatably “Americanized.” Although originally written in a nationalizing context and although exhibiting elements alien to American culture, this fiction, as it turned out, could be made into an American product that both edified and entertained while supporting American domesticity and also sometimes gently pushing against domesticity’s narrower definitions. It did so over several decades until the vogue ran out of steam in the new century. “We do not know how much of this taste for creditable, sympathetic German romance has lasted until now,” the New York Times mused in 1907, unsure in this case whether the quality and appeal of this German romance were to be attributed to Annis Lee Wister’s skill or the German originals: “Perhaps Mrs. Wister’s own art and discretion lent a certain measure of literary dignity to the sentiment of some of her German originals which they did not possess in their first estate or which a less competent translator would have failed to convey.”

The German families presented to Americans in translation—from the Hohenzollerns to the Hellwigs—were families in turmoil, and the German world of these novels was filled, in the words of Agnes Hamilton, with people whom one would “not speak to in real life.” Yet even as these books showed family enmity in a harsh light, they invariably concluded with hope that the ideals prevailed, on which domesticity, affective individualism, the identity of the middle classes, and the liberal state relied. For the women who translated and read them in the Gilded Age, especially in the first three decades after the Civil War, they provided, in the formulation of Barbara Sicherman, “escape to” possibility, re-union, even adventure, within domestic spaces and escape from their own lives insofar as German fictions presented an alternate world in which the burden of the merely quotidian was absent. Those who read these novels could find entertainment, distraction, and edification in the privacy of reading as well as in the social experience of reading aloud and exchanging and gifting books. In German domestic fiction they went abroad to found a homeland for the time it took to read a book.

By the turn of the twentieth century, however, the interest in translating new popular German novels by women was diminishing. The several generations of German women writers who had produced this fiction were dead or near the end of their writing careers, as were the American women who
translated them. Nevertheless, these somewhat old-fashioned novels continued to be reprinted, sold, and read for another ten to twenty years, proving with an afterlife of forty-five years in some cases not exactly to be ephemera.6

Nearly thirty years after the mention by The Nation of “family likeness” in 1871, The Independent relied on the same conceit in characterizing Wister’s translation of H. Schobert’s Picked Up in the Streets: “It has a family resemblance to the weaker books in the dozen or so of translations from German novelists (exception being made Miss Marlitt) that the publishers have found popular light literature for American readers, especially of the gentler sex.” The reviewer then offered the further examples of “Von [sic] Heimburg, Streckfuss, Werner and Von Reichbach [sic].”7 The Independent was certainly correct to identify similarities among these novels, yet it bears considering that over the course of Americanization, of selection, translation, packaging—in uniform bindings, paratextual labeling, and so on—branding, marketing, and reviewing coupled with further labeling and categorizing, these novels had become somewhat more like one another and somewhat less like themselves.

If Alcott’s displacement of the “h” and “ae” in Professor Bhaer’s name can figure the transformations that took place in this German women’s fiction as it was “Americanized” and yet still identified as German, then a concluding mention of Alcott can serve to characterize one last transformation that took place in the American reading and marketing of this literature. In 1908 The Dial marked Wister’s death with a short notice asserting that “thousands of readers—especially young readers” were mourning Wister’s passing: “To find another American writer who has made for herself such a place in girls’ affections, one would have to go back to Louisa Alcott.” Furthermore, the notice predicted, “By generations of children yet to come her versions of wholesome and homely German romances are likely to be read with all the delight that hailed their first appearance.” Over the course of even this short notice “readers” have devolved into “children,” and the article thus, with some exaggeration, mimics what appears to have happened with this German fiction in general: it began in Germany as reading for adults that could be enjoyed by the whole family because it was deemed “wholesome,” and it was listed and reviewed as such, that is, adult reading, in America, too. Yet publishers—in imperial Germany as well as the United States—subsequently packaged it first and foremost for a female reading public. By the new century the literature previously marketed in that segment was seen as ever more childish as contemporary literature offered stronger stuff and as some women vigorously pushed the boundaries of gender restrictions in the work force, in education, in politics, and as writers. In the new century in America at least some of this
German fiction took its place beside other “classic” nineteenth-century international reading that was also popular—*Jane Eyre*, the novels of Jane Austen, Dumas, Scott, Eliot, Dickens, and others. These books, as classic novels, were taken up and read avidly by younger readers—indeed, were recommended to them—even if still read and esteemed by some adults.

An eighty-one-year-old Mary Stuart Smith, who had enthusiastically welcomed modern times in the automobile, nevertheless retained an allegiance to the reading of her younger years, to edification, entertainment, and the happy ending that projected harmony, reunion, and acknowledgment. She confessed to her husband in 1915: “I am *trying* to read the novel Janie has lent me, but they (I mean novels) of the day, rather disgust and revolt me—nothing inspiring or lofty about them.” Letters from her last years mention her wish to get hold of *Sunshine Jane* to amuse some friends and her desire to read the new novel by the author of *Pollyanna*.

As for the feminized Germany mediated by this fiction, it hardly needs repeating that it was largely unlike the aggressive militarizing empire that would be at war with the United States in 1917. Nor was it much like the oppressive “severe, wooden character in tails with a full black beard and a medal on his chest,” bearing the title “General Dr. von State” imagined by the young Thomas Mann and emblematic of the old order against which the young German moderns rebelled. The Germany of women’s novels translated into English for Americans’ reading pleasure was instead not so different from the United States of women’s wishing as the old castles, country estates, and sneering aristocrats might have led some to think.

For some American readers, the German regions of these books housed an ideal, in which femininity aided in the production of masculinity and an idea of nation in which the individual and the home mattered. German fiction in translation invited American readers to envision Germany as a place where some of their fondest wishes for real power of love, virtue, and sentiment could be pleasurably realized—even if arbitrarily and only in the imaginary. This was a power nineteenth-century American women were told they could and should wield, and some of them enjoyed traveling abroad, as it were, to do so. However, it was perhaps ultimately not so much German life that many of them encountered in their reading sojourns, but their alienated and sometimes idealized selves.