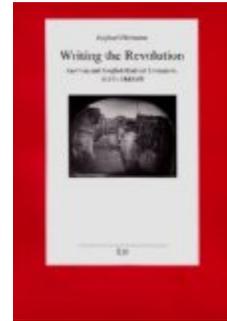


Raphael Hörmann. *Writing the Revolution: German and English Radical Literature, 1819—1848/49*. Münster: LIT Verlag, 2011. 392 S. ISBN 978-3-643-90134-7.

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## R. Hörmann: Writing the Revolution

In the early 1840s, Marx took a social turn. By defining humans as social animals, as a “species-being,” Marx recognized not only the sensual and material frameworks for human freedom but also the necessity of moving beyond radical politics toward social revolution. Marx’s epiphany was, of course, part of a larger, evolving discourse that sought to redefine radical politics. If philosophy and political economy were critical components of this discussion, poetry, literature, and song were no less important for stirring the soul and sharpening the aspirations of the political left. Raphael Hörmann’s instructive study examines the relationship of belles lettres to the political imaginary of radicalism. Examining the verse and literature of English and German writers between the Peterloo Massacre of 1819 and the Revolutions of 1848/49, Hörmann traces the evolution by which ideology and social consciousness converged with aesthetic expression to create a “new poetics of social revolution.” Indeed, the seamless bond between poetry and politics is a hallmark of the age; writers saw the renewal of one as a necessary reconstitution of the other.

The study is composed of four large chapters, all of which are subdivided into numerous sections. The first chapter lays out the book’s design to inquire “into the relation of the social material and the cultural realm” (p. 19). This approach pleads for interdisciplinary analysis, especially between literature and history, a desideratum that further acts as a critique of theories that decouples discourse from its socioeconomic contexts. The author is careful to distance himself from older models of base and superstructure and orthodox assumptions of social

totalities, but his argument robustly ratifies Marxist approaches that explore the interpenetration of ideology, aesthetics, and material environments. In examining how ideology affected literary expression, which in turn shaped revolutionary practice, Hörmann deploys Marx’s categories of social revolution and social consciousness to locate the emergence of “socialist poetics” by mid-century. Three subsequent chapters then examine the various stages by which radical literature expressed positions cleaving toward social revolution. Accordingly, the author looks at English radicals around the Peterloo Massacre, principally Percy Bysshe Shelley but also Richard Carlile and Thomas Blandford; the “social turn” taken in the 1830s in the verse and prose of such writers as Heinrich Heine, Ludwig Börne, Thomas Lovell Beddoes, and Georg Büchner; and, finally, the evolution of a socialist poetics in the 1840s in the work of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Georg Weerth. The chapters present these politically engaged writers diachronically and as phases of a larger cultural formation, which might be described as the discovery of the proletarian subject and social revolutionary consciousness. The climax of the narrative, the failure of the Revolution of 1848/49, plays a significant role in Hörmann’s argument. Whereas prerevolutionary literature still envisioned revolution as a drama with hues of utopic optimism, the revolution’s failure now shifted the dialectic of revolutionary poetics to one of “tragedy and farce,” a disposition whose idioms and tropes postponed classless society to a distant future (p. 90).

There is much to praise in these chapters. Hör-

mann makes a credible case that the specter of “social revolution,” a notional aim in leftist politics since Gracchus Babeuf, inflected the corpus of Shelley, Büchner, Weerth, and other politically engaged writers in various degrees. His sensitive glosses bring the reader into instructive contact with the idioms and register of radical verse and prose. Critically and carefully Hörmann displays the engagement of writers with early industrialization and how each articulated their language of protest from one of moral economy, as with Shelley, to one of forward-looking social revolution. In doing so, Hörmann deftly incorporates English and German radical literatures into one comprehensive field of analysis. Whether looking at the life of Shelley, Heine, or Weerth, the movement of ideas, people, and political ideals crossed borders freely and contributed to the broader European impulses of political radicalism and early socialism. Thomas Lovell Beddoes, the English poet and playwright who trafficked in radical circles in England, Germany, and Switzerland, exemplifies well the transnational dialogues that linked England with the Continent and, similarly, Germany with Western political currents. Weaving together analyses of literary craft and political sensibility, the study makes a persuasive case to rescue Ludwig Börne as a “marginalised author” in German studies who should be viewed less as an “anachronistic Jacobin” than as a radical informed by early socialist discourse (p. 233–234). Similarly, Hörmann confirms Georg Büchner’s oeuvre as one saturated with a social revolutionary program. By contrast, the author devotes considerable time to reducing Heine’s status as a revolutionary thinker. He repositions Heine’s verse and prose on the radical spectrum, taking great pains to expose Heine as a bourgeois liberal whose fear of plebeian masses and limited flirtation with socialist ideas fail to qualify him as a precursor to Marx (p. 187). On this point, Hörmann crashes through open doors. Scholars have long portrayed him, politically, as a liberal who took a pension from Thiers’s government and, aesthetically, as a poet whose democratic idealism had little correspondence to social realities. His close reading of Weerth’s English poems, however, is alive to the poet’s revolutionary aims and lyrical talents, and the discussion further suggests how Chartist impulses seeped into continental discourse. Finally, Hörmann provides depth and insight to Marx’s statement in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* that history repeats itself first as tragedy and then as farce. The famous observation, he shows, was more than a quip; Marx was deeply informed with classical definitions of tragic drama, and articles in the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* anticipated the *Brumaire*’s

interpretive mode.

Alongside the many virtues of this study, a few problems arise. First, better editing was needed to redact repetition, excise jargon, and tighten arguments. Identifying the book’s audience is also a problem. For readers who know only English, the copious block quotes in German prevent any careful scrutiny of the argument. Similarly, insufficient introduction of secondary literature and historiographical debate will impede many readers’ ability to vet the analysis. The study repeatedly invokes interdisciplinarity, yet its prose cancels it. More fundamentally, the meanings of such terms as social, socialism, social revolutionary, proletariat, and other such neologisms of the postrevolutionary political landscape needed sharper historical contextualization. Through the 1840s these terms lacked conceptual fixity, and such semantic fluidity played a pivotal role in interpreting authors’ political perspectives. Perhaps, then, the Marxian analysis, which orients the study, is both a strength and a weakness. Its virtue is manifested in any number of intelligent discussions about radical politics and social consciousness. Yet teleological assumptions hinder interpretive glosses. Such statements as “Shelley is beginning to move towards a proto-Marxist view that regards the political system as a secondary function, a superstructure, built upon a socioeconomic system” does little to illuminate the intellectual remit of English radicalism (p. 107). In the same way, characterizing Büchner’s outlook as grounded in “the early proletarian German revolutionary discourse” is virtually meaningless; no such discourse existed in the 1830s, though an oppositional political culture with radical elements did (p. 171). Missing, too, in this transnational exposé of social-revolutionary discourse is any sustained attention to French letters, which arguably initiated and structured the continental debate on the concept of the social.

But these criticisms should not overshadow the author’s worthwhile project and its execution. The author commendably demonstrates the breadth and depth of social consciousness in English and German literature and makes a plausible case for the concept’s broader use in European culture. Building on this set of questions, scholars should further expand the inquiry to design a reception study that measures the attitudes of both intellectuals and workers toward social revolution after 1850. Alongside the evolving aesthetic modes of representing social revolution, it remains a pressing question to know why so many workers consistently resisted the concept throughout the century.

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