



German History in Documents and Images

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Gustav Freytag: Excerpt from a Review of Recent German Novels (1853)

Like Auerbach, Gustav Freytag (1816-1895) was a prominent and highly successful Realist writer. In the following excerpt from a review of recent German novels, which was published in his own literary journal, *Die Grenzboten* (1853), Freytag presents a program for Realist literature. He insists that authors have to observe reality closely and immerse themselves in life in order to produce works of "artistic truth and beauty."

Is the world around us really so lacking in interesting figures, shocking events, even in great passions? Everywhere, in almost every sphere of human activity, in every corner of our Fatherland, despite everything, life flows so richly and so energetically that a person with the talent to represent and the will to make an effort would never lack interesting ideas, impressions, and motifs. It is not the case that authors lack images of life which they can transform, but rather that authors lack poetic power, eyes which know how to see, an education which understands life, and a sense for beauty which knows how to focus on the ideals inherent in life. If only just one of the novels written in Germany in the past year knew how to present the vigorous, healthy, strong life of an educated human being – his struggles, his travails, his triumph – in such a way that we could truly enjoy it! In reality, we have a great number of vigorous characters among our farmers, merchants, industrialists, etc., whose life stories and circumstances would inspire the greatest human interest in those people who became acquainted with them. Why do we not have a poet who can do something analogous with his work? These great spheres of human activity – farming, trade, industry – are themselves the foundation for countless interesting and striking human relations, for moving passions and the most remarkable entanglements. Why do our authors not take up their pens to present such real phenomena to us with artistic truth and beauty? The answer to this question is, unfortunately, because the majority of our novelists understand almost nothing about our own life, about the affairs of the modern world. Even J. Gotthelf, with all his creative power, would not have been in a position to compose his works had he not lived for years among the peasants and become acquainted with their households, their activities, their joys, and their sorrows, down to the smallest detail.

Most of our German authors allow themselves the liberty to portray modern-day affairs without sufficiently knowing the activities of the people they wish to represent and the influence these activities have upon their soul and worldview. They still seek the poetic only in opposition to reality, as if our real life was somehow devoid of poetry and beauty. But there is much more poetic feeling in the life of every practical farmer or businessman, every active person who pursues interests with seriousness and persistence, than in those novels in which our authors

oppose real life with shadowy heroes in the most improbable situations. Therefore, anyone who wants to write novels should make a small effort to himself be a competent person, which means to make himself at home in a sphere of human interest, through sustained and manly activity as a useful part of the great chain of powerful human beings.

Source: Gustav Freytag, "Deutsche Romane" ["German Novels"] [Review], in *Die Grenzboten* 12/1 (1853), p. 77-80, 157-60.

Original German text reprinted in Max Bucher, Werner Hal, Georg Jäger, and Reinhard Wittmann, eds. *Realismus und Gründerzeit: Manifeste und Dokumente zur deutschen Literatur 1848-1880* [*Realism and the Founding Era: Manifestos and Documents on German Literature 1848-1880*]. 2 vols. Stuttgart: J.B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1975, vol. 2, pp. 71-72.

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