

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Jean Paul (Friedrich Richter)

The life of Jean Paul. Jean Paul (1763-1825) is an original voice in the chorus of German voices that make up the transition from Weimar Classicism to the Romantic tone. He was born in the area of Franconia, in Wunsiedel. His father was an organist, then was hired on as village pastor, but soon after that died, leaving Jean Paul and the rest of the family in serious poverty. By strong learning efforts Jean Paul got into and passed on from the gymnasium in nearby Hof, then moved on to the University of Leipzig. While in University his true interests declared themselves, and he shifted his studies from Theology to Literature. From the outside one would have expected this decision, from the exceptionally labile imagination of the young man. (In 1790, when he was twenty seven, he had had a moving and life-changing vision of his own death.) In any case the first literary publications of Jean Paul, which followed in 1793 (*Die unsichtbare Loge*) and 1795 (*Hesperus*), introduced some of the literary traits which were to dominate the development of his lifetime of writing: prominent use of the Doppelgaenger and fake suicides, directive materials for what was to go on to be developed (but always surprising) fictions full of genuine religious sentiment, artifice and trickery, and an edgy humor, which unnerved those who were looking for the 'classical' postures of Goethe and Schiller—who did not like Jean Paul—and which were a complex way of bringing formal and individualistic language worlds together.

The Work of Jean Paul. Jean Paul breaks sharply from the classicism we see insistent in German literature of the last quarter of the 18th century. We can see this break in the remarkable story, '*Die unsichtbare Loge*,' '*The invisible Lodge*,' 1791, the first work of Jean Paul to attract significant attention. The text is essentially a Bildungsroman, a tale of the education of youth, such as was in vogue in contemporary works like Goethe's Wilhelm Meister tales, or in certain works of Wieland or Karl Philip Moritz. But the difference is marked, with Jean Paul. Gustav, Jean Paul's personage elected to be raised to the level of a hoher Mensch, a high exemplar of mankind, lives and is educated, for the first eight years of his life, in a catacomb. (The Pietist individual raising him is called 'the genius,' who assures Gustave that in emerging into the upper world he will enter both the realm of death and the realm of God, who will guarantee rebirth. The tale oozes with overtones of the ancient Greek idealist/mystic tradition, especially that of Plotinus.) The actual education of Gustave begins with a blinding experience of the brilliance of the present world, but after that sets in the complexity of educational stages. For a while the tutor of Gustave is Jean Paul, who takes advantage of his role as embedded persona to divagate on many topics of interest to him—government and politics, marriage, pedagogy, even the structure of the narrative which he himself is weaving—until the burden of the narrative structure becomes too much for Jean Paul the narrator and he must be replaced by his sister, while at the same time the primary narrative is enriched by a second narrative about Gustave, introduced by a court poet who has been brought into the tale. Enough? Is the point clear enough? Jean Paul introduces, from the start, a kind of ironic, self-reflective, philosophically speculative, indeed religious tale which has no parallel in the work of his end of century contemporaries.

Reading

Primary source reading

Behler, Ernst, *German Romantic Literary Theory*, 1993.

Secondary source reading

Fleming, Paul, *The Pleasures of Abandonment: Jean Paul and the Life of Humor*, 2006.

Further reading

Stopp, Elisabeth, *German Romantics in context: Selected essays 1971-86*, 1992.

Original language reading

Wiethoelter, Waltraud, *Witzige Illuminationen: Studien zur Aesthetik Jean Pauls*, 1979.

Suggested paper topics

Read Jean Paul's *Titan*, or one of his other numerous prose fictions available online, and consider what is meant by the humor of Jean Paul. Is it what we might prefer to call irony today? Are there conspicuous elements of satire in his humor? The Romantic movement in Germany is often associated with the development of paradox and dialectical thinking—two different but related issues. Is Jean Paul's humor related to those issues?

Jean Paul's '*Unsichtbare Loge*,' and many of his other works, deals with 'education,' the growth and maturing of a young person into the social world. We have seen that Goethe, in his works on Wilhelm Meister, is centrally interested in this kind of Bildungsroman. What connection do you see between the Romantic movement and this kind of tale of personal growth? Is there a connection of the Bildungsroman with the notable 'rediscovery of the child' in Romantic thought?

Excerpt (from *Titan*) <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/35664/35664-h/35664-h.htm>

On a fine spring evening, the young Spanish Count Cesara came, with his companions, Schoppe and Dian, to Sesto, in order the next morning to cross over to the Borromæan island, Isola Bella, in Lago Maggiore. The proudly blooming youth glowed with the excitement of travelling, and with thoughts of the coming morrow, when he should see the isle, that gayly decorated throne of Spring, and on it a man who had been promised him for twenty years. This twofold glow exalted my picturesque hero to the form of an angry god of the Muses. His beauty made a more triumphal entry into Italian eyes than into the narrow Northern ones from the midst of which he had come; in Milan many had wished he were of marble, and stood with elder gods of stone, either in the Farnese Palace or in the Clementine Museum, or in the Villa of Albani; nay, had not the Bishop of Novara, with his sword at his side, a few hours before, asked Schoppe (riding behind) who he was? And had not the latter, with a droll squaring of the wrinkle-circle round his lips, made this copious answer (by way of enlightening his spiritual lordship): "It's my Telemachus, and I am the Mentor. I am the milling-machine and the die which coins him,—the wolf's tooth and flattening mill which polishes him down,—the man, in short, that regulates him"?

The glowing form of the youthful Cesara was still more ennobled by the earnestness of an eye always buried in the future, and of a firmly shut, manly mouth, and by the daring decision of young, fresh faculties; he seemed as yet to be a burning-glass in the moonlight, or a dark precious stone of too much color, which the world, as in the case of other jewels, can brighten and improve only by cutting hollow.

As he drew nearer and nearer, the island attracted him, as one world does another, more and more intensely. His internal restlessness rose as the outward tranquillity deepened. Beside all this, Dian, a Greek by birth and an artist, who had often circumnavigated and sketched Isola Bella and Isola Madre, brought these obelisks of Nature still nearer to his soul in glowing pictures; and Schoppe often spoke of the great man whom the youth was to see to-morrow for the first time. As the people were carrying by, down below in the street, an old man fast asleep, into whose strongly marked face the setting sun cast fire and life, and who was, in short, a corpse borne uncovered, after the Italian custom, suddenly, in a wild and hurried tone, he asked his friends, "Does my father look thus?"

But what impels him with such intense emotions towards the island is this: He had, on Isola Bella, with his sister, who afterward went to Spain, and by the side of his mother, who had since passed to the shadowy land, sweetly toyed and dreamed away the first three years of his life, lying in the bosom of the high flowers of Nature; the island had been, to the morning slumber of life, to his childhood's hours, a Raphael's painted sleeping-chamber. But he had retained nothing of it all in his head and heart, save in

the one a deep, sadly sweet emotion at the name, and in the other the squirrel, which, as the family scutcheon of the Borromæans, stands on the upper terrace of the island.