

Roderick Cavaliero is a writer and historian. He is the author of *Admiral Satan: The Life and Campaigns of Suffren*, *Independence of Brazil*, *Strangers in the Land: The Rise and Decline of the British Indian Empire* and *Ottomania: The Romantics and the Myth of the Islamic Orient* (all I.B.Tauris) as well as *The Last of the Crusaders: The Knights of St John and Malta in the Eighteenth Century* and *Romantica: English Romantics and Italian Freedom* (Tauris Parke Paperbacks).

GENIUS,
POWER
AND
MAGIC

A Cultural History of Germany
from Goethe to Wagner

RODERICK CAVALIERO

I.B. TAURIS

LONDON - NEW YORK

Published in 2013 by I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd
6 Salem Road, London W2 4BU
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010
www.ibtauris.com

Distributed in the United States and Canada Exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010

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ISBN: 978 1 78076 400 9

A full CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

A full CIP record is available from the Library of Congress

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: available

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Typeset in Perpetua by 4word Ltd, Bristol

Printed and bound in Britain by T.J. International, Padstow, Cornwall

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INTRODUCTION

Genius, Power and Magic

A Land of Pumpernickel, Philosophy and Poetry

Providence has given to the French the empire of the land, to the
English that of the sea, and to the Germans that of – the air.
(Attributed by Thomas Carlyle to Johann Paul Richter [1763–1825])

There is an imperative which commands certain conduct
immediately ... This imperative is Categorical ...
This imperative may be called that of Morality.
(Immanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Ethics*, 1785)

Thy bread Westphalia, thy brown bread I sing,
Bread which might make the dinner of a king;
Though one of those whom Englishmen call dogs,
One whose nice palate has been us'd to frogs,
Could not, forsooth, digest a stuff so coarse,
But call'd it good provision for his horse.
(James Boswell, *On the Grand Tour*, 20 October 1764)

THE AIR TO which Germany was given the empire, in the words of Johann Paul Richter, was that numinous, vaporous mist of metaphysical complexity. Some of this was interpreted as genius, much as magic. Power it was not, since the Germany that entered the eighteenth century was a loose conglomeration of variously sovereign principalities, nurtured on deep thought, fine music and hard rye bread which, in terms of power, seemed an essential futility. Some were sustained by memories of a past as inheritors of the power and prestige of the Roman Empire,

as a bulwark against the menace from the east, as myrmidons of Imperial greatness, as champions of Martin Luther and reformed Christianity. Others were still in the vanguard of Latinity, in their devotion to Rome, sandwiched as they were between Rome's two protectors, the empires of Austria and France. The first was the titular legate of the Holy Roman Empire, the second heir to Louis XIV's Carolingian hubris, and both were locked in almost permanent rivalry for land, power and influence. As a result there were few visitors to a land that consisted largely of forest, unless they were the armies that pillaged and sacked their way across territory not their own, in struggles that left a trail of desolation for those who had no lord strong enough to protect them.

Some of that past had been glorious. Germans had defended Europe from the Mongol, and the Slav and, for those who wanted to be free of him, had defied the Pope. But during a 30-year war, which finally ended in virtual stalemate in 1648, their country had been torn to pieces by religious strife, trampled over by polyglot Imperial armies, Swedes and French. Her Imperial grandeur now belonged to Austria, her German-speaking but hardly German neighbour to the south, who had, in that war, employed mercenary armies to achieve religious conformity and dynastic ambition. By the beginning of the eighteenth century that other menace to peace and prosperity, Louis XIV's vain ambitions, had been thwarted by the genius of the Duke of Marlborough. But a brittle glamour from across the Rhine still dazzled German potentates with dreams that they might too if they pressed hard enough on their citizenry and kept out of serious trouble, be *rois soleils*, living in grand palaces and indulging their royal whims. The princes collected soldiers, less for defence than for show and as a source of income, lending them out to more powerful monarchs. Their principal use, otherwise, was to play war games, sometimes, weather permitting, in the vast palaces themselves. They also formed the nucleus of orchestras for which many of the princes had a passion. The princesses largely stocked nurseries, for Germany was known for her plentiful supply of consorts to be found among her philoprogenitive royalty. By an accident of marriage and dynastic history, Great Britain had found her king there. That gave the electorate of Hanover prestige for its ruler as a king, if not a German king, but little else.

It was hard for ordinary mortals to appreciate what was happening in Germany. The language was largely incomprehensible, and though she was virtually a cultural colony of France, she was no France. Nor, despite her forests and mountains, her medieval cities and Gothic cathedrals, was she Italy. Such Romance as she had was that of the fairy story, and her fairy stories were pretty gruesome. During the long eighteenth and nineteenth centuries between the end of the War of Spanish Succession (1701–14) and the coronation of a Prussian overlord as *Kaiser* (1871), Germany was understood to be a land of Pumpnickel, Philosophers and Poets. All three were largely indigestible to foreigners and not to them alone, but in that time Germany experienced a renaissance in many ways as epoch-making as that of their fellow ‘geographical expression’, Italy. The collective, idiosyncratic description of the principalities of pre-Imperial Germany as ‘Pumpnickel’ states derives from Thackeray’s excursions into the pocket handkerchief-size Grand-Duchy of Kalbsbraten-Pumpnickel in *The Fitzboodle Papers* and *Vanity Fair*. Pumpnickel was one of the components of that air, wind rather, of abstractions and eccentricities of which in Johann Paul Richter’s words Germany had the empire. Thackeray’s lofty detachment from their grand ducal triviality was worthy of the Punch editorial table, and was intended to cast a comic light on the ferment of intellectual energy many of them were experiencing, but Thackeray was too lofty to perceive that this ferment was questioning the position of God, of man, of nature and sensibility, drinking deep of the elixir of Romance that was beginning to sweep across Europe at the time. The German princes may have been as essentially powerless in the face of their final destiny, as were their Italian counterparts, but their Romantic Renaissance was to be every bit as profound.

European Romanticism was fuelled by British empiricism, French rationalism and German mysticism. The emergence of British world power was attributed to their sense of enquiry linked to a lust for adventure, which gave them the empire of the sea. Britain’s was not *une mission civilisatrice*; they were in pursuit of markets and pelth. France on the other hand, apart from empire of the land, was also the so-far unchallenged conquistador of an intellectual empire. The Germans, in response to both, sought to establish a claim to a culture, however insubstantial, which acknowledged her past and defined her future, and in this they evoked, if they did not entirely accept, the rational enlightenment of both France and England.

These essays attempt, not to define that German culture, which continues to defy simple prescription, but to chart how under prevailing Romantic influences it limped from the empire of the 'insubstantial air' to an intellectual power that could rival the fascination of France, and challenge the pragmatic certainties of England. France had traditionally seen Austria as her main European rival and France's cultural colonies, the German states, as uncertain allies and fair-weather friends. England saw the German states mainly as a source of mercenaries and of that other kind of mercenary, royal spouses. When one of the French intellectual conquistadors, Madame de Staël, was exiled by Napoleon, she made her home in French, not German-speaking Switzerland, but she saw in Germany, not Austria, a potential challenge to French intellectual supremacy.

In England, transmogrified into Great Britain, only philologists were interested in their Germanic roots; even Dr Johnson was more at home in the classical and Romance texts. German might be a language spoken by Baltic traders, but diplomatists and other visitors used French. The British royal family may have been German but by 1760 the monarch, George III, claimed that he was first and foremost a Briton. Over the century three things were to promote an interest in Germany; the Anglophilia of her foremost savant and poet, Goethe; the earth-shaking discovery by German writers of William Shakespeare; and Prussia's defiance of Louis XV and final participation, despite years of defeat and retribution, in the defeat of Napoleon, rolling back France to the west bank of the Rhine. A minor contributory factor was the decline in the popularity of Italy with post-war tourists, now looking, like Jos Sedley in *Vanity Fair*, for cheap and comfortable vacations for their sisters, their cousins and their aunts, more exotic, and less costly, than Bath with which they had had to be satisfied through the long years of the French wars. In Scotland the eyes of the Athens of the North turned across the latitude to other northern states. After all, Germany's foremost philosopher, Immanuel Kant, had Scottish forbears, and the Scottish tongue bore, Walter Scott thought, a family resemblance to low German.

The German King of England, also elector of Hanover, founded a university in his territories, at Göttingen in 1737, to be as enlightened as a university could be, free from royal and religious pressure. Thither

Coleridge, 60 years later, went to learn German, write a life of Lessing and immerse himself in the German empire of the air: in its ideas, philosophy and poetry. It inspired him with an ambition to enrich English drama by German models, in themselves enriched by Shakespeare, and he returned to England determined to translate Schiller and understand, and help his fellow countrymen understand, Immanuel Kant. Carlyle, translating Goethe and Schiller in the 1820s, and rejecting Coleridge's Kantian claims, finding his increasingly drug-induced person vague and incomprehensible, as he found Kant himself, became his St Paul in the mission to convert the British to appreciation of their nearest cousins in Germany. Though never going to Weimar himself until after Goethe's death, he had early become a distant acolyte of Goethe and champion of his poetry and prose, and then persuaded himself to translate poetry into power as he fell under the thrall of Frederick the Great of Prussia.

For all Carlyle's enthusiasm, the English never fell under the spell of Goethe's zeitgeist novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), which infected Europeans with a Romantic bohemianism. Unlike Casanova who was fornicating his way round some of the princely states at much the same time, Goethe seemed to suggest that unconsummated love was a suitable, even a preferable recipe for Romantic life and, frequently, early death. Casanova's memoirs of his amatory travels, on the other hand, published posthumously between 1826 and 1838, while Carlyle was writing the life and opinions of Professor Teufelsdröckh in *Sartor Resartus*, were perhaps a truer picture of the Germany of the lesser courts, before they were overtaken by Goethe's moral earnestness, and Romantic idealism. Coleridge, for his part, fell in love with thinkers as transcendently vague as he. Carlyle, who in his Romantic, secular agnosticism accepted the existence of a God but also His relegation to the broom cupboard, came to believe that Germany had become a nursery for lesser deities. They were not gods but they determined the destiny of human affairs, and were to be designated as heroes.

Despite and often because of the sceptical light shed on knowledge by Scotland's Hume and France's *philosophes*, all was not bathed in clear sunshine. There was throughout Europe an anti-intellectual, anti-enlightenment element in contemporary, even radical, thought, and Carlyle recognised it, was even its prophet. Deep in the German soul, as

in his own, there was a predilection for the mysterious, opaque, arcane and even sinister – indeed for magic. Germany was still in search of the philosopher’s stone, or a simulacrum of power. Alchemists were more common than chemists and language was magically bent to imply, if not assert meaning, manifest in the literary lucubration of Herder and the philosophic conundra of Fichte.¹

The leaps in the thought of Kant seemed like verbal gymnastics. It all appealed mightily to Coleridge, who sought, in its effusions, answers to the deepest problems of human existence. It had its origins in the cult of a pre-historic Germany of forests, sylvan gods and devils; it was nourished by legends of German defiance of a Rome attempting to pierce these sacred spaces with a rationality of arms; it confounded the Latin version of reasonable religion with the confusions of Pietism, and it countered the idealism of Hellenism and the southern Renaissance with mystagogues, like Eckhart, Paracelsus and Böhme. It revelled in the obscurities of Kant and Fichte and of the *Illuministe* members of lodges of irrationalism; it invented the ‘shudder novel’ of inexplicable horrors that stalked the corridors of peaceful homes. Even in Goethe’s exaltation of ‘Nature’ lurked the deity Pandaemon, not the clock-maker god of the ‘enlightened’. Carlyle was accused of promoting a new paganism or ‘goetheism’, which was to replace the scepticism of the eighteenth century.² Spirits of malevolence, caprice and cruelty even haunted Germany’s nurseries, as starkly chronicled by the brothers Grimm. Presiding over this was an aristocracy for the most part semi-literate, boorish and gluttonous, with passions modelled on what was conceived as the lifestyle of the Bourbon kings of France for hunting wildlife and women. Coleridge and Carlyle in their different ways found the whole mix intoxicating.

German, however, did not come easy to the English tongue, despite its Germanic roots, and the poets, dramatists and theologians of Germany, inspired by English (and Scottish) poets and thinkers, wrapped their thought in a language which concealed hidden beauties and profound truths from the uninitiated. This was attractive to the writer who was to call herself George Eliot, but language and the ideas it concealed were not among Germany’s more accessible glories. These were Germany’s baroque and rococo palaces and churches in which its musical life was to rival that of both France and Italy. The roll call of composers, from the

Bachs and Handel to Liszt and Wagner, was witness to the growing passion of little courts, starved often of visitors and intelligent conversation, for some entertainment higher than that provided by hunting and feasting, warring and whoring. When Dr Charles Burney in 1773 went to sample the sophisticated musical culture of the German-speaking world, he felt even then he was talking to titans, and Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven were not among them. Haydn had been for the last dozen years quietly tucked away in the Esterházy palace in Slovakian Hungary, Mozart was still a teenager and Beethoven was only three years old. Of three British visitors to eighteenth century Germany, Charles Burney and Boswell found it an uncomfortable country to visit but, like John Moore, making a tour of little courts in 1772, they were attracted by its easy going hedonism, and by its music, performed by musicians many of whom were barely a cut above country bumpkins.

The Napoleonic interlude badly dented the general admiration for the supremacy of French civilisation. Even such a formidable prince as Frederick the Great had shown his ability as an enlightened ruler and ruthless war leader, in French. Berlin, in his reign, followed French models. The palace of Sanssouci, his favourite retreat, his prolific if traditional musical compositions, his collection of savants which for a time numbered Voltaire, were all devices to create a court in Potsdam as brilliant as that presided over in Paris by La Pompadour, (even if he commemorated that lady satirically on the cupola of his new palace as one of the three naked graces, along with his other foes, the Austrian Empress, Maria Theresa, and Catherine the Great of Russia). The post-Frederickian defeats in the wars that followed, the humiliation of Prussia by Napoleon in 1806, the unhappy subservience of so many German polities to French control, which culminated in the kingdom of Westphalia under Napoleon's youngest brother, all combined to promote, if not a sense of political unity, a sense of German cultural identity, which wanted to owe little to France. The Battle of Waterloo, which for the humiliated Prussians was a Prussian victory, sealed the flight from French and initiated a new compact with Britain, France's oldest foe and the German's latter-day ally.

Goethe had managed to keep himself from the Napoleonic embrace, politely hearing but not heeding the Emperor's invitation to go to Paris and write a proper novel. He found Mme de Staël opinionated and superficial,

but he would have agreed with her belief that German culture might replace French, now, in her view, in terminal decline. While he did not hope for a super-king or hero to lead a united Germany, he thought that Germanic culture was advanced enough to achieve the unity of which Germans were beginning to dream. Despite the enthusiasm of Coleridge and Carlyle, however, it was not the search for that cultural renaissance which brought Byron sailing down the Rhine; he was en route to the mountains and the Romantic freedom they gave to Switzerland. Even Walter Scott, who was enthusiastic enough to translate Goethe's first novel and who would have liked to visit Weimar and meet the author himself, attempted no German novel. His imagination brought him near, when, fascinated by the later Middle Ages and the emergence of the Swiss as the nemesis of Charles the Bold of Burgundy, the richest and most powerful prince at the time in Europe, he wrote *Anne of Geierstein* (1829). Part of it was set in the Rhineland. For both Childe Harold in 1816 and Walter Scott 12 years later, the Rhine was the great waterway defining Europe; to the west was France, to the south Austria and to the east a no-man's land of forests and fairy tale phantoms and philosophers, flea-bite principalities and fleas.

It was Disraeli who broke this clouded window into a new world. Venturing east in his first novel, *Vivian Grey* (1826), he described a young man's romantic adventures in a petty German principality, which he himself had never visited, and was entirely fictional. Thackeray did go further east still but he did so with a sneer at the almost buffoonish seriousness of such societies, concluding that all was burlesque and pretence. Even as late as the 1870s, when George Meredith wrote *The Adventures of Harry Richmond*, the German principality in which most of the action takes place, remains, like those visited by Vivian Grey and George Fitzboodle (1842), a sinister but also absurd place of Romantic make-believe. At the end of the century, this make-believe finally lingered on the air in Anthony Hope's creation of Ruritania (*Prisoner of Zenda*, 1894). 'Pumpnickel' despite the growing power of Prussia seemed immortal.

Flattered by German worship of Shakespeare, which had never been a strong point with the French, the British showed a growing interest in the Romantic ambiguities of the Germans. Coleridge translated two of Schiller's historical plays; Carlyle wrote his life, and Schubert's settings of romantic poems brought ecstatic German romantic love

and melody to British drawing rooms. The marriage of a half-German queen to a ‘Pumpernickel’ prince, impeccable in manners, constitutional integrity and universally good taste, quickened that interest. Victoria and Albert between them emerged as model ‘Pumpernickel’ monarchs. The grandfather of Felix Mendelssohn may have begun as a poor rabbi’s scribe and ended as the German Socrates, yet Frederick the Great took pains never to meet him. Before his musical grandson, the Queen of England knelt to pick up the music that had fallen to the floor. The prince presided over the creation of a cultural centre in London, almost rivalling the embellishment of Munich and Berlin by their respective monarchs and, using the decoration of the newly built Houses of Parliament as the catalyst, tried to animate a school of English art just as Ludwig I of Bavaria (*regnavit* 1825–48) had done for German in Munich before his infatuation for the Irish adventuress, Lola Montes.

If Johann Sebastian Bach, after 100 years, emerged under Mendelssohn’s baton as the authentic voice of God, (who remained, when He was allowed to remain at all, a retiring deity), Richard Wagner became, for his royal admirer, Ludwig’s grandson in Munich, almost God himself. For Carlyle, as for many Germans, Goethe’s was the voice of God’s replacement, Nature, and Schiller was a German Shakespeare. Disraeli, Meredith and Anthony Hope by allowing their heroes to play with German princesses, unimportant beyond their Pumpernickel capsules, created a home for Romantic fiction. Schiller’s *Ode to Joy*, which had soared over Europe in the final movement of Beethoven’s apotheosis symphony (composers may write thereafter more than nine symphonies, but none for over a century was prepared to call any of them his tenth), was within 50 years to usher in a new and less joyous Germany.

One state in Germany, the kingdom of Prussia, had emerged as a result of Napoleon’s wars as the largest and most significant German state after the Austrian Empire. Her territorial acquisitions on the Rhine during the peace after 1815 converted her, in due course, from an Eastern to an industrialised Western European power. The reforms that followed the debacle of 1806, when the ensigns of Frederick the Great went down before the French Eagles, so improved general literacy that, by 1850, levels exceeded that of Great Britain. Serious reforms in the universities turned the student body from duelling and wassailing to serious study, and their

staff from metaphysical alchemy to intensive enquiry into experimental science and research. Berlin, from being a military cantonment, emerged as the cultural capital of the north, filching that accolade from Saxony's Dresden and Goethe's Weimar. Imperial grandeur inspired Friedrich Schinkel to create a new city, as Nash had done for London, and Haussmann was to do for Paris.

Goethe may have invented the German novel with *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, but the coterie of Berlin writers, Kleist, Hoffmann and La Motte Fouqué, gave Germany her short story. These were internationalist in scope, welding together Romantic fantasy, psychological intensity and mystery, which also characterised the stories of Edgar Allan Poe. Hoffmann, was by way of being a polymath, writer, painter, composer and critic; Kleist was a suicidal depressive, and La Motte Fouqué, a failed soldier who was obsessed by Prussia's military past which had saved her more than once from extinction. The spirit of discipline bequeathed by Frederick William I and his son, Frederick the Great, despite this efflorescence of literary creation, still remained the guiding spirit of the State. Frederick William III and his son, fourth of that name, tried to rule as autocrats until forced to concede a constitution in the 1848–9 Year of Revolutions. The ethos of the State, however, which had emerged from the sandy wastes of Brandenburg and the spiritual desolation of Pomerania, so marked in the work of Caspar David Friedrich, from the French effusions of Frederick the Great and from the Romantic importance of being Ernest Theodore 'Amadeus' Hoffmann, remained Junkerdom, and this was, in the end, to be the nemesis of 'Pumpnickel'. 'Elizabeth' von Arnim's gentle references to her Man of Wrath and her Pomeranian German garden (1898) could not conceal the dim beat of war drums.

The little courts of Germany, like those of Italy, had been for different reasons incubators of a renaissance in philosophy, poetry and music. None of these, aspiring to the 'empire of the air', threatened the political status quo. Even Goethe, no more than Clemenz Metternich, wanted a dangerous ebullition of nationalism. For him, cultural rather than political unity would be enough, until the German states had spent another century evolving towards nationhood. Like that other fragmented nation, Italy, the little courts of Germany were to receive their quietus at the hands of the north, the bare bodkin being wielded, for the Italians by the more

efficient (and Frenchified) Piedmontese, and for the Germans by military-mad Prussian dynasts, whose ambitions embraced national greatness. Pumpernickel bowed before their glory, lamented only by those who feared that poetry would be suffocated in the swirling clouds of military incense, and its delectable music be drowned by the brass of big bands. Sadly they had reason to fear.

In the use of German names in the main text, I have adopted a compromise. I use the normal English rendering of Frederick the Great (not Friedrich) and Johann Sebastian (not John Sebastian) Bach, Charles instead of Karl, except where it is more appropriate to use Karl (as in Marx), but Johann, not John, Wolfgang von Goethe. Two people have read this book in its preparation and I am grateful to Linda Kelly and to Glen Cavaliero for perceptive comments; its shortcomings are entirely mine. I dedicate it to a kinder, gentler, more eccentric but essentially more civilised German Republic that, today, has replaced that of the Men of Wrath.

Fitzboodle in Pumpernickel

Thackeray goes to Learn German

The prince did not inhabit his capital but imitating in every respect the ceremonial of the court of Versailles, built himself a magnificent palace and a superb aristocratic town, inhabited entirely by his nobles and the officers of his sumptuous court.

(W. M. Thackeray, *Barry Lyndon*, chapter x)

Pray fag at your German. If you have enjoyment of old ways, habits, customs and ceremonies, look to court life.
(George Meredith, *The Adventures of Harry Richmond*, chapter 22)

IT WAS SOME years after the Battle of Waterloo that a small party, made up of Major Dobbin, Amelia Osborne, née Sedley, young George Osborne then in his teens and his uncle, Joseph Sedley, the ex-Collector of Bogglywallah, India, set out for a tour of Europe. The Channel packet was full of rosy children, nursemaids and pink-bonneted ladies and gentlemen in travelling caps and linen suits, for this was the annual invasion of the watering places of Europe. They were bound for Rotterdam, after which the party transferred to a steamer that took them down the Rhine to Cologne. They luxuriated in the pleasant Rhenish gardens, among the purple-clad, castle-crested mountains, the old towns and their quaint, protective ramparts, listening to the jingling bells of the lowing cattle returning from sweet pastures. The ex-Collector was gratified that in the daily gazette he had been promoted to Herr Graf Lord von Sedley. Everything was idyllic.

During their journey, they went often,

to those, snug, unassuming dear old operas in the German towns, where the noblesse sits and cries and knits stockings on the one side, over against the bourgeoisie on the other, and His Transparency the Duke and his Transparent family, all very fat and good-natured ... occupy the great box in the middle and the pit is full of the most elegant, slim-waisted officers with straw-coloured mustachios.

At last they reached a comfortable little town, the seat of the Duke of Pumpnickel. It had a good hotel and a better table where the young George Osborne tucked into lavish quantities of ‘schinken and braten and kartoffeln, cranberry jam and salad and pudding and roast meats and sweetmeats’.¹

They were in the realm of His Transparency Duke Victor Aurelius XVII, sovereign of a dukedom some ten miles in breadth, bordered on one side by Prussia and on the other by the river Pump and the territory of the Prince of Potzenthal. The Duchy of Pumpnickel had its own army, with a rich and numerous staff of officers and few men, who spent much of their time ‘marching in Turkish dresses with rouge on and wooden scimitars, or as Roman warriors with ophicleides² and trombones, or playing to the café society in the Aurelius Platz’. The Duchy had diplomatic representatives from both France and Britain; the latter, the British *chargé d’affaires*, Lord Tapeworm, succeeded in persuading the party to linger some months in such a delightful spot. Joseph (Jos) Sedley, having persuaded Major Dobbin to bring his ceremonial uniform, donned his East India Company court dress for the inevitable honour of being presented to His Transparency, after which all the court ladies called on the Sedley caravan. An earlier duke, ‘a perfect wonder of licentious elegance’³ had attempted to build his Versailles but ran out of money; the gardens however had impressive fountains which spouted water and made dreadful groans from their lead Tritons – on feast days only – to which all were invited. To pay for the palace and gardens, everyone had been ennobled for a fee. Pumpnickel was the very model of a modern state. It had a constitution and a Chamber that may have been elected or it may not, but it did not matter as it never met. The theatre, however, was open twice a week, and there were receptions and salons practically every other night so that a man’s life was a perfect round of pleasure.

Great power rivalry provided a certain spice to quiet and unpretending Pumpernickel, the *chargés* of France and Britain championing one or other of the divas of the opera. Tapeworm espoused the sweet little Mme Lederlung, his rival the greater singing range of Mme Strumpff, who had three more notes. But she was middle aged and so stout that in Bellini's *La Sonnambula* she had difficulty in sleepwalking out of her window across a narrow mill plank, which creaked and trembled under her weight. Mr Titmarsh, visiting at the same time as the Sedleys, thought that the hero was lucky not to be suffocated by *La Sonnambula's* final embrace but, then, partisan politics were no judges of voice.

A royal wedding took place during the stay of the Sedleys, between the Hereditary Prince of Pumpernickel and the Princess Amelia of Humberg-Schlippenschlop, to which all the neighbouring princes and grandees were invited. Bushels of each prince's noble orders of chivalry were exchanged, the French *chargé* appearing covered in ribbons like a prize carthorse – at which sight Lord Tapeworm was grateful for the royal edict that members of the British diplomatic corps might not accept any foreign chivalric decorations without their sovereign's express licence.⁴ The fountains ran with sour wine or beer, there were contests for sausages suspended from slippery poles, and gaming booths were erected for all those ready to lose money, in which the amiable Jos was to cover the bets of a domino-masked Becky Sharp.

* * *

William Makepeace Thackeray, alias Mr Titmarsh, actually arrived in Weimar in September 1830, with the intention of learning some German in case he decided to become a member of the foreign service. At the same time, George Savage Fitzboodle of the estate of Boodle, held in the Boodle family since the reign of King Henry II, arrived in his travels through Germany at the Grand Duchy of Kalbsbraten-Pumpernickel. George Fitzboodle, despite his boasted heritage, was an indigent second son, who had flunked out of Cambridge, been persuaded to resign his commission in the army, and was now in need of an affluent wife. He had an eye for pretty if buxom girls but his appetite for tobacco had so far successfully nauseated any likely spouses. The Grand Duke himself had been present – indeed

accidentally knocked down – in the haste of Fitzboodle’s escape from the reception that was to announce the fulfilment of his vow to give up tobacco for six months, whereafter his affianced bride-to-be, Mary McAlister, would announce their betrothal. The reception had ended dramatically with the discovery that Fitzboodle had smoked a cheroot that very morning.

The Grand Duke’s father had, as Grand Duke of Kalbsbraten-Pumpnickel, married his cousin the Princess of Saxe-Pumpnickel, so that Duke Philibert Sigismund Emanuel Maria now ruled a city of 2,000 people from a palace which would accommodate twice that number, with an army headed by a General, two major-Generals and 64 officers, all Knights Grand Cross of the ancient Order of the Potato (*Kartoffel*) (as indeed was almost everyone else in his dominions.) Most of the foot soldiers had been cut to pieces at Waterloo.

George Fitzboodle could not resist the pleasures of a court where the Grand Duchess numbered so many beauties among her maids of honour. He fell wildly in love with two in rapid succession, first the daughter of the Herr Oberhof und Bau-Inspector of the Duchy, and second the muse, the Corinne of Kalbsbraten-Pumpnickel, Ottilia von Schlippenschlop. Neither beauty was either slender or ethereal, this not being a physical characteristic of the Pumpnickel ladies. Dorothea, the daughter of the Herr Bau-Inspector was ‘of the earth earthy and must have weighed ten stone four or five pounds if she weighed an ounce’. The first fell from grace at a ball while dancing the waltz with Fitzboodle, collapsing in a heap of arms legs and bountiful flesh to the fury of her parents and the amusement of the men who thought Fitzboodle far too pleased with himself. His physical and Platonic attraction for Ottilia was dimmed first by the gradual conviction that she ate far too much and was finally killed by her eating at least nine oysters that were clearly ‘off’. She also proposed to eat Fitzboodle’s share of the contaminated delicacy, sent by the free city of Hamburg to Grand Duke Philibert to mark the signature of a commercial treaty between them.⁵

* * *

Thackeray was visiting Europe under licence from his mother, having left Trinity College, Cambridge, early without taking a degree. He had only a

vague idea of what he wanted to do in life but was 19, dilettante, devoted to the theatre, probably sexually experienced, and heir to comfortable expectations. So he decided to go to Germany to learn German, and to hone his journalistic skills by producing a German sketchbook – which he never did, unlike his *Irish* and *Paris Sketchbooks* and his *From Cornhill to Grand Cairo*. The sardonic memories of his time in Germany were however to surface in *The Fitzboodle Papers*, in *Barry Lyndon*, in *Vanity Fair*, and in *The Rose and the Ring*.

By chance, Thackeray met an old acquaintance in Weimar studying German for the Foreign Office, and was persuaded to prolong what would otherwise have been a fleeting visit to immerse himself in the life of the tiny state which extended 20 miles from Jena to Erfurt, and which had survived the Napoleonic wars as one of the 33 (now reduced by 1830 to 32) states which made up the German Confederation. Actually its great days were over. Grand Duke Charles-Augustus, who had patronised music and letters and numbered not only Goethe, but Schiller, Herder and August von Kotzebue among the State luminaries, had died a year earlier. Weimar's army was slightly larger than that of Grand Duke Philibert of Kalbsbraten-Pumpnickel, numbering 100 men under arms. Its magnificent theatre had put on the best of German classical and contemporary drama and it had as many bookshops and concert halls as Bath. Its greatest attraction by far was Goethe, still alive and only too willing to show off his knowledge of the work of Scott and Byron to the 20 or so English studying German in Weimar. The last he thought undoubtedly the greatest genius of the century, the one true representative of the modern poetical era.⁶

Thackeray found he had an easy entrée to the social life of Weimar, to its balls and parties, cutting a dash with his great height (six feet, three inches) in the uniform of the Devon Yeomanry of which he asked his mother to buy him a commission and a uniform. Despite his reception by Goethe in a very 'kindly and rather in a more distingué manner than he used to the other Englishmen', Thackeray was not impressed by the encounter. Goethe might be 'a noble poet and an interesting old man to speak to ... but I believe he is little better than an old rogue', for Goethe was not held in England to be the great man he was considered elsewhere in Europe.⁷ His not wholly sentimental passions for otherwise married young women, the sorrows of Werther whose remains his chaste

innamorata had watched, 'borne before her on a shutter, (when) like a well conducted person (she) went on cutting bread and butter'; all inspired a cool contempt for so self-celebrating a literary lion.

The Fitzboodle Papers appeared in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1842–3, but Thackeray's opinion had softened by 1855 when he wrote to George Lewes, contributing his mite to Lewes's monumental life of Goethe. He then recorded that his reception by the great man had been kindly and his daughter-in-law's tea table was always spread for English visitors. Goethe and he passed hour after hour together, according to Thackeray that is, reading over novels and poems in English, in French as well as in German. He recollected that the 'Great Man's' glittering eyes unnerved him as a young visitor for they resembled those of Melmoth the Wanderer who had made his bargain with a *Certain Person*. Their talk was always of 'Art and Letters'. All in all, from the generosity and kindness of the Grand Duchess, to the respect and veneration in which Weimar held its foremost citizen, Thackeray thought he had never 'seen a society more simple, charitable, courteous and gentlemanlike than the dear little Saxon city where the good Schiller and the great Goethe lived and lie buried'.⁸

This good feeling extended retrospectively to his relations with Otilie, Goethe's widowed daughter-in-law, who, for all Thackeray's good memories of her, is the inspiration for George Fitzboodle's Otililia von Schlippenschlopp, the Muse of Karlsbraten-Pumpernickel, 'an historian, a poet, a blue of the ultramarine sort'.⁹ This avatar of Lady Jane of Gilbert's *Patience* was

pale and delicate, ... wore her glistening black hair in bands, and dressed in vapoury white muslin ... She sang her own words to her harp ... suffered some inexpressible and mysterious heart pangs ... and might look for a premature interment.¹⁰

Otilia's ballades all had sad ends, either consumptive or suicidal. Thackeray's unflattering portraits of the Weimar beauties were not wholly without substance. *The Fitzboodle Papers* owe everything to Thackeray's experiences in Weimar, but whether they created or merely supported the mordant view of feminine achievement which he showed in his novels is debatable. Otilie von Goethe welcomed visiting writers – in 1854 they

included George Lewes and George Eliot – and she was always ready to talk about her father-in-law but, in Thackeray’s satirical portrait, she contributed to the creation of Pumpernickel.

* * *

Thackeray’s growing nostalgia for the Germany he had visited at 19 never eradicated his general belief that there was something absurd about the country, with its 33 sovereign courts, its dull but copious meals and its picture book history. The passion for things medieval and Gothic which Walter Scott had inspired struck him as harmless but basically comic, and inspired his pastiche of a German Romantic *Legend of the Rhine*, with its silly names, and chronological absurdities. The poem is set at the time of the Crusades but men nevertheless drank coffee and smoked cigars, and ate meals they might expect at one of the sophisticated chop shops of Jermyn Street. Ruined and haunted castles with ghosts of former castellans, clearly forerunners of the denizens of Gilbert’s *Ruddigore* and of J. K. Rowling’s Hogwarts, while the awful Count Rowski of Donnerblitz steps straight into Monty Python. The troop of peasants ‘chanting Rhine-songs and leading in their ox-drawn carts the peach-cheeked girls from the vinelands’ belong to the world of *Euryanthe* and other German Romantic operas. Nor is Thackeray above the onomatopoeic ‘whizz! crash! clang! bang! whang!’ of Dennis the Menace and children’s comics. At one point, to make doubly sure his readers know that he is guying the concept of chivalry, he refers his readers to *Ivanhoe*. There is a lot of swearing by local saints and feats of prodigious skill, terminating in a happy marriage between the hero, a dispossessed prince in mufti and a peachy princess, well within the class structure. Thackeray was stepping out of Pumpernickel into *The Ingoldsby Legends*.

* * *

Few people before the end of the Napoleonic wars visited Germany. Some might have sailed down the Rhine on their way to Italy, others like the indomitable Dr Burney, Fanny’s father, might have gone in pursuit of music or, like Boswell, in search of courtly pleasures. Some were mercenaries,

like Boswell's old patron, Lord Keith, or diplomatists, like Lord Tapeworm, caught up in the trivial pursuits of the normal Pumpnickel courts. Travel in Germany was not undertaken lightly without one's own conveyance. All who were without any found the experience atrocious.

Comfort-loving James Boswell did his best to laugh away the transport and the inns. The post was 'a barbarity of manners, just a large cart, mounted upon very high wheels which jolt prodigiously and had three or four deal boards laid across to serve for seats'. Nor was the resting place at the end of the day a model of cleanliness or decorum. In the Prussian territory of Vellinghausen, in the county of Mark in the Rhineland, the traveller had to do with a table spread with straw as a bed. 'Thus was I,' wrote Boswell, 'just in the situation of a bold officer. Thus did I endure the very hardship of a German campaign which I used to tremble at the thought of when at Auchinleck.' A few days later he had to lay in a stable, on the straw-covered floor, under a sheet, with cows on one side, horses on the other and cocks which crowed all night. 'I admired the wisdom of the Sybarites who slew all those noisy birds.' In north Germany he made straight for the stable to secure a comfortable billet of straw, despite the risk of being robbed or trampled on. As he travelled south the inns improved.¹¹

After a journey of 75 miles in 1772, Dr Burney was 'roasted alive and jumbled to death'. He felt he had 'been rather kicked than carried from one place to another.'¹² John Moore, travelling with an English duke in 1786 had a slightly better experience. At Frankfurt he found inns that for cleanliness, convenience and number of apartments were superior to any other he had met with on the continent and on a par with the most magnificent establishments in England.¹³ But that was anything but the experience of William and Dorothy Wordsworth who travelled with Coleridge in 1798. The Wordsworths were not impressed, the streets of Hamburg were ill-paved and stinking from sewage and abandoned rubbish. The inn was dirty, the food served crudely, and everyone seemed to be intent on cheating them. Perhaps there were honest people in Hamburg but William and Dorothy lacked the skill, or the will, to find them.

The crowded carriage that took them on to their next destination was like a dung cart, and the wretched inns at which the Wordsworths stayed were each one more strange and miserable than the last. Dorothy suffered

in her bowels from the jolting of the dung cart on the horrible roads. They finally came to rest in Goslar, in Lower Saxony, with no German and a total misanthropic view of the German people, a wretched race of grocers and linen drapers, a selfish race intent upon gain. The brother and sister declined to cultivate the society of this humdrum, sleepy little town. It was somewhere they wished to forget, except that in the solitude of this hotel Wordsworth wrote Book I of *The Prelude*, and the three Lucy poems. Was it for this that they had left Grasmere?¹⁴ Coleridge meanwhile, having come to learn German, had left them for a pastor's family in Stettin and then the University of Göttingen, at both of which he was supremely happy.

The emergence of Prussia as a major power in Germany, and the replacement of what had been electors, dukes and margraves by kings, meant that the diplomatic service wanted German speakers, hence the large number, at least a score, of young Englishmen whom Thackeray met learning the language in Weimar, where Saxon, fast becoming the received pronunciation in Germany, was spoken. With the purest German, the extensive mountains, lakes and forests, providing a Lake District of immense size in which to pedestrianise, with its castle eyries, great cathedrals and palaces, with the sausage, potatoes, beer and pumpernickel which produced a placid and contented citizenry, Saxony was about to provide a Victorian Grand Tour attraction to rival Tuscany in Italy.

A German Panorama

A Panoply of Princes

It is reported that a Frenchman on being served with it (pumpernickel) remarked '*qu'il était bon pour Nickel*,' which was the name of his horse. (Thomas Nugent, *The Grand Tour*, 1756, vol ii, p. 80)

To God I speak Spanish, to women Italian, to men French, and to my horse – German. (Charles V, 1509–58, according to Lord Chesterfield's letter to his son)

GERMANY TOOK A long time to recover from the Thirty Years War, which had ended in a peace of exhaustion in 1648. It had devastated her like a hurricane, exhausted her economy, decimated her population, and reduced her peasants in certain places to a state of savagery.¹ It had drained her energies, stultified her intellectual growth and dulled her religious enthusiasm. Survival and resuscitation were her principal concerns, peace from the depredation of marauding armies, and authority she could trust were the extremes of political ambition. The political map of old Europe had largely survived and the medieval mosaic of sovereignties, owning a phantom allegiance to a mystical head, the elected dignitary who held the position of Holy Roman Emperor, was the structure that it was hoped would provide, peace, prosperity and pumpernickel for all. The peace of Westphalia had accepted the division of Europe into Catholic and Protestant areas in which the principle that the head of State determined what should be the religious loyalty of his people. At the same time, these states having survived the crucible of war,

their princes laid claim to an absolutism, that established despotisms, some benevolent, some not, in their search for a power that was beginning to accrue to the more developed polities in Cromwell's England, Richelieu's France and Imperial Austria. It was not accompanied by any sense of a German national identity. In their way they could have stated, as did the head of one of these more modern states, that *l'Etat, c'est moi*.

The megalomania of Louis XIV which nearly reduced western Germany to ruin similar to that which it suffered from the earlier war, and its recovery after 1714 was the work, not of peaceful, industrious citizens but of absolute rulers. These engrossed power and wealth into their own hands while they 'civilised' their people by the construction of courts that emulated the glory of the tyrant in France from whom the wars that had been fought had intended to 'liberate' them.

German-speaking central Europe was composed of over 300 sovereign principalities, secular and ecclesiastical, kingdoms, electorates, dukedoms, margravates, counties, free cities and church estates. Some were ancient sovereignties reaching back to the Middle Ages, some owed their existence to a decision of the Holy Roman Emperor, and some were the creation of disputed inheritance split among princely scions, or the result of war.² The Holy Roman Empire was a largely toothless tiger but still, in emotional and juridical terms, a tiger. Technically that dignitary had owed his election since 1692 to nine electors, the rulers of the five comparatively large electorates, Bohemia, Brandenburg-Prussia, Saxony, Bavaria and Hanover (in 1692 the Duke of Brunswick-Luneburg was elevated to Elector), the three princely archbishoprics of Mainz, Cologne and Trier, and the Elector Palatine. The Holy Roman Emperor had, since 1438, with few breaks, been the Habsburg Archduke of Austria (who as sovereign of Bohemia was also an Elector). Loyalty, or not, to the Emperor, even of pocket handkerchief-size clerical states and fragments like the County of Lippe, the smallest secular state, was dictated by self-interest. The empire was guided collectively by a Council of Electors, by a Council of Princes, which comprised the lesser rulers, the 34 ecclesiastical and 60 secular princes, and two collectives, one representing monasteries and religious houses, and the other the hundred or so Imperial counts, and finally by a Council of the 51 Free Cities of which some were major commercial centres and others barely villages.³ These councils were a bureaucratic constellation of individual

representatives who communicated with each other in writing but seldom, if ever, met. Throughout the second half of the seventeenth and most of the eighteenth centuries, princes, electors and free cities were all concerned to revive their individual states by economic activity, to defend their ancient privileges and to stay out of fratricidal conflict, but they were seldom able to override Imperial traditional law and custom. As their principal desire was to prevent the Imperial power from becoming too prepotent or interventionist while leaving them free to acquire territory for themselves within the existing mosaic of sovereignties, concerted action, except in comparatively trivial matters, was uncommon. The constituent members, however, could not ignore the apparatus of Imperial power.

In individual states political activism was discouraged, and intellectuals looked outside of Germany for stimulus. Despite the often wanton and disproportionate damage the armies of Louis XIV did to Germany, as they fought over her territory with a careless ferocity in their seventeenth- and eighteenth-century wars, hatred of Frenchmen did not lead to a rejection of the cultural dominance of France. Even in so advanced a state as Frederick II's Prussia [Frederick Hohenzollern, King Elector of Brandenburg-Prussia and Duke of Magdeburg, (*regnavit* 1740–86)], French was the language of the court, Frenchmen were invited to serve the state as savants and administrators, and the natives were left to grumble but accept, so strong was the prestige of the ruler. To demonstrate a not entirely slavish dependence, the challenge of new ideas from England was beginning to be felt but devotion, even subservience, to the ruling prince was the rule, and society, under the influence of both French and English, or more often Scottish, ideas, became increasingly secular. Worldly Prince-Bishops and philosophic Lutheran clerics replaced the Church Militant as arbiters of behaviour. Some princes changed their religious faith to conform to that of the majority of their subjects, and thus assist the homogenisation of their state; others came to a *modus vivendi* with a majority that did not share their faith, all with the intention to secure greater temporal and spiritual powers. Provided these powers were not directly challenged, the aim for intellectuals, being lesser mortals, was to imitate the investigative questing of the English. For the princes, it was mainly a court on the French model, increasingly hedonistic, even barbaric, in its pursuit of pleasure.

All of them, whatever their private beliefs, shared one rule of State: that he who held the sovereignty determined the overt political, religious and economic duties of its citizens. Government was by single unchallenged authority, protected by a combination of naked power, backed by Imperial support, international treaty, or, sometimes, the will of (some of) the people. The old institutions of popular separation from the sovereign had faded, weakening any checks on the will of the ruler.⁴ The law in this *olla podrida* of divided sovereignties always provided work for lawyers, harnessed to sustaining the power of the prevailing autocrats.

Theology, especially in the Protestant states, increasingly concentrated on producing obedient priests for an obedient faithful. It constituted the principal intellectual study at the many universities, thrusting into second place the philology and culture of ancient Greece and Rome. The study of Lutheranism and the classical world provided the principal vehicles through which the north German people participated in a common culture, without disturbing the prevailing rule of the prince. That there were 50 university establishments throughout Germany did not mean a disinterested love of learning; rather they were the preferred nurseries of administrative support to princely rule, inculcating judicial and economic administrative competence, philosophic and theological quiet, and pedagogic authority.

Germany was divided between the three main Christian confessions, Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Calvinist. The faithful did not always follow the profession of the ruler – there were more Protestant subjects throughout the empire though a greater number of Catholic princes – but the ruler did prescribe whatever limitations there were on dissidence: on who could hold office, what feasts they observed, what was taught in schools and universities. Expulsion rather than outright persecution was used to achieve conformity, and there was considerable movement from one principality to another. The dislike of one Christian belief for another and polemical wars of words, often spilling over into violence, still racked communities, but the common culture was one where obedience to the secular ruler was the sovereign requirement. What religion you professed should be optional.

This was the considered view of those students of the ancient world of Greece and Rome. Lutheran pastors could see the advantages of the

general acceptance of toleration, as it left them free to explore theological conundra on the purpose of human life without fear of losing their posts. Dr Burney, travelling Germany to study its musical culture, was surprised to find women singing and Protestants worshipping in the devoutly Roman Catholic church of St Bartholomew in Frankfurt, whose tower was in the keeping of the Lutherans who appeared not to object to the arrangement.⁵ Rulers by the middle of the eighteenth century had learned the commercial advantages which religious toleration often brought with it, to the point that a rationalist like Frederick the Great could declare that all religions were equal and good and that if Turks and heathens wanted to settle in Prussia he would build them places of worship.⁶

Not all rulers were as enlightened as Frederick, and despite Prussia's welcome in 1685 to some 14,000 Huguenot refugees after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, his father, Frederick William I, felt impelled to dismiss Christian Wolff from the University of Halle, at the instance of the Pietist establishment, for his views on religion and reason. The Pietists in the early eighteenth century were trying to put religion back into daily life, since it seemed to have been banished to Sunday, and Halle was a centre of the new piety. Because Pietism preached order and discipline, especially in the army, it was popular with the king, who saw it as an essential prop to his theory of how to run a state, and Pietism became in effect the state religion of the absolutist Prussian state.

Religion was in all the principalities of Germany generally supportive of the notion that the ruler's word was law, whatever faith one espoused. The servility of that faith was ensured by government patronage and provision, so that in the words of Goethe the religion its clerics preached 'was merely a sort of dry morality' appealing neither to the soul or the heart.⁷ The State was steadily replacing the Church as the supreme authority in German life. With few exceptions, the smaller the absolutist princes the less they could claim to have the true interests of their principalities at heart or to have deserved their power by their performance in war or in peace. Their effulgence was lighted by pomp and circumstance, accompanied by dancing masters, mistresses and opera singers and, where the Church professed to be independent, a complaisant Bishop or Abbot.

* * *

Lutheran church music provided an acceptable and generally uncontentious presentation of the divine, freeing the soul from more extreme doctrines of salvation. Devoted to praise of the Almighty and His works, it became the humaniser of an often bleak theology, while secular music represented in the fantasies of the opera the cultural international language devoted to the myths of the ancient world. Almost every German prince kept an orchestra and some were musical enough to perform with selected musicians in a court concert. Opera in Germany began in the Imperial court at Vienna, where members of the royal family were not above taking roles. The fashion soon spread. The free city of Hamburg was the first home to a public opera house; Munich had its own in 1689, enthusiastically supported by the Duke who imposed a tax on playing cards. Berlin followed suit in 1703 and Dresden about 1717. The main language of opera was Italian, as were also the singers and dancers, but the instrumental music was played largely by Germans, performing in private orchestras. The churches promoted choral music. Despite the domination of models from Italy and France, compositional confidence grew in the courts of these petty powers and became the seedbed to the reawakening of the German mind.

The musical world was bold, cosmopolitan and international, whereas literary activity, when not theological, at the beginning of the eighteenth century threatened to be a dangerous activity. What might begin as a republic of letters might follow the Dutch or English example and become a larger and more extensive republic, both anti-religious and anti-monarchical. Writing uncensored material could encourage both heresy and immorality. Yet in this semi-arid desert of the mind there was to be, in the years that followed the new century, an astonishing growth of intellectual activity. It was more remarkable because, since Martin Luther's day, the German language had almost atrophied, 'and left but the miserable bickering of theological camp-sutlers to quarrel over the stripping of the slain'.⁸ All educated persons looked for their models first to France and later to England, as the two intellectually most advanced societies, as well as the principal contestants for world power. Because the clumsy and guttural High German was a linguistic hobbleddehoy, French and Latin were the preferred vehicles of thought.

In Carlyle's words, French 'lay like a baleful incubus over the far nobler mind of Germany; and all true nationality vanished from its literature or was heard only in faint tones ... but could not reach ... the ears of foreigners'.⁹ France dominated language, clothes, cuisine, furnishings, dance, music and even illnesses. In the palaces that each little prince had aimed to build like Louis XIV, life was to be as like a French court as possible, even though in its essential grossness and provincialism it might retain the features of an older Germany. Voltaire in 1759, when he wrote *Candide*, was not impressed by The Castle of Thunder-ten-Tronck, where his hero was born. To display the baron's greatness, the castle had a great gate and, marvel of marvels, windows of glass, and its hall was hung with tapestries. There was a pack of hounds that ran wild in the farm and could be mustered for hunting. The baroness weighed about 25 stone and everyone behaved as if the Baron Thunder-ten-Tronck *was* somebody.¹⁰ Richer princes would employ French instructors in the kitchen, the garden and the stables, to ensure that noble life approximated to what went on in Versailles. A growing child might utter his first words in French, and from then on he would only hear German used to address soldiers and horses.

As all the princely courts achieved, more or less, a state of absolutist rule, following Louis's example, their absolutism became tempered by the practical problems of exercising it. Despotism was certainly the preferred Pumpnickel model but not often enlightenment. Charles Frederick, Margrave of Baden (*regnavit* 1738–1811) did abolish torture (1767) and serfdom (1783), remitted many feudal dues, imposed a tax on land and practised religious toleration, but he was the exception.¹¹ More often it was the size of the princely domain that inhibited reform as few rulers wanted to curtail the size of their revenues. For some, the most lucrative way of making money was to hire out their soldiers as mercenaries. The disciplined, drawing room armies of Pumpnickel thus went off to fight colonial wars in America and South Asia for the British and the Dutch, or were enlisted in the service of Austria and France to fight in their interminable conflicts. One of the episcopal Electors of Mainz, Emmerich Joseph (*regnavit* 1763–74), a scion of the Briedbach clan of Imperial Free Knights who had sunk their talons into ecclesiastical preferment, so

controlled the revenues and behaviour of his electoral diocese as almost to become a Pope in his electorate, and provided models for the Josephan ecclesiastical reforms in the empire towards the end of the century.

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If Carlyle represented the common profile of German rulers ‘as wrapt up in ceremonial stateliness avoiding the most gifted man of a lower station, ... (an) ancient, thirsty, thick-headed, sixteen-quartered Baron’, he was not entirely fair to do so, since in many cases the social life of German princes embraced savants, preachers, writers, actors, musicians, even, as with Casanova and Cagliostro, international charlatans.¹² There was, however, a marked degree of eccentricity, even madness among these Pumpernickel courts, induced sometimes by in-breeding, more often by the delusions bred of absolute power and by the strain of living up to a standard of civilisation they could not sustain, sometimes even from the fermented rye in pumpernickel. ‘Germany swarms with princes, and dukes’, wrote one observer, ‘of whom three quarters aren’t quite right in the head.’¹³ Indeed in some states the princelings were not ‘competent to rule chickens’.¹⁴

In most of the states, the ruling prince alone had money. Agriculture was largely subsistence only and the ruler took his tithe of it all; taxation concentrated wealth on the palace enabling princes to patronise architects and decorators, musicians and actors, so that the court provided the main source both of employment and entertainment for the citizens. The four Electors of Brandenburg (a kingdom since the beginning of the eighteenth century), Bavaria, Saxony and Hanover, ruling large states, had incomes greatly superior to the smaller principalities, but the Landgrave of the comparatively small state of Hesse-Kassel was among the richest and most powerful of them all.¹⁵ Excessive wealth, lack of education and total autocracy induced habits of gluttony and drunkenness, of cruelty or neglect among many of the rulers. Wantonness on the part of both princely husband and wife was often more openly gross, as there were fewer people to observe it, than similar practices behind the civilised screens of Versailles. Augustus of Saxony (Elector of Saxony, 1694–1733, and twice King of Poland from 1697–1704 and 1709–33), and Margrave

Wilhelm of Baden (*regnavit* 1677–1707) exercised their seraglios in open court rather than discreetly in a *Pac des Cerfs*. A Prince of Brunswick got through two casks of Tokay each day, drinking it, feeding it to his parrots with bread soaked in it, and then bathing in it. Above all a competitive vanity often led them to outdo their neighbours. Life among the people however, as Casanova observed in 1752, was through enforced indigence economically chaste and rather dull.¹⁶

Dr Burney, visiting Germany in 1772, was convinced that the ‘most shining parts of a German court, are usually its military, its music and its hunt’. Vast forests were kept intact to provide the second, while the people lived in beggary.¹⁷ The German attachment to its forests had been noticed by Tacitus, who called them the *silves horrida* and when, in the eighteenth century the first forest histories appeared, it was their size, antiquity and Germanness that marked the peculiar distinction of Germany.¹⁸ They had become one of the marks of princedom. Frederick II Hohenzollern thought that there was no cadet of a princely line that did not think he should behave like Louis XIV. According to Moore, he hunted insatiably, ‘he builds his Versailles, he has mistresses, he keeps an army ... God have pity on a country afflicted with such a prince.’¹⁹ Frederick in his time conformed to the type: he built his palace at Potsdam, and he provided entertainments free in the royal theatre. His indulgence, however, was the army. His father had created and nursed it carefully by keeping it out of wars, while Frederick’s intention for its use was to wage successful aggressive and defensive wars. Prussia under Frederick William I had been run on tight military lines. Its nobles had one function: to be immaculate military officers; the pastimes of the king and his sons were military drills. Frederick continued the tradition. Even the music of the day was military, and only in the evening would the court relax at a concert, though Dr Burney found the programmes dull and old-fashioned.²⁰

The full horrors of the Prussian military under Frederick II were tellingly described by Thackeray in his picaresque novel, *Barry Lyndon* (1844), under his Fitzboodle pen-name. It was the year in which Carlyle began his 14 years researching and writing the life and times of Frederick, some of the object of which was to rehabilitate his hero from Thackeray’s obvious distaste for the man and his regime. Redmond Barry (*Lyndon*), the hero in flight from possible arrest in Ireland for murder, is kidnapped

to serve in the Prussian army during the Seven Year War. As an unwilling trooper he graphically experiences the beatings and malevolence of Prussian officers until he is able to escape with his rapsallion uncle to engage in an alternative career, of chicanery and fraud, outside Prussia.

The two Barrys, Redmond and his uncle, the self-styled Chevalier de Balibari, are two Irish adventurers who survive by native wit and card-sharping. But the treatment of common soldiers in Frederick's service, the most notable part of the novel, was in Fitzboodle's description both barbaric and sadistic. Frederick ran a sort of Stasi-like information and spying service to bind the men to their officers and officers to their king, intended to discourage desertion but, in Barry's case, creating a resolve to defeat it.²¹ Though Redmond Barry was a murderer and a deserter, his panache, his boasts that invariably ended in misfortune and his incurable self-confidence created an anti-hero among the 'scum of the earth enlisted for drink'. Thackeray did not find military service ennobling; Frederick did not consider it anything else.

Frederick shared his passion with other Pumpnickel princes for what were virtually private armies, but theirs were mainly for hire. The Duke of Württemberg kept, according to Burney, never less than 6,000 men under arms in time of peace, 'so that nothing can be seen in the streets except officers', in black whiskers, white peruques, with curls at the sides, six deep; their blue coats, patched and mended with great ingenuity and diligence. As there was little occupation for the sons of the nobility they opted for a military career as soldiers of fortune, often in the service of other potentates, like Maurice de Saxe (1696–1750), the most illustrious of the many bastards of Augustus the Strong of Saxony and Poland, who started his career as a hired officer at the age of 12. Most of these armies were for decoration. The Landgrave of Hesse-Kassel in 1786 used his wealth to keep 16,000 men in time of peace, drilling them in the Prussian manner, in whose army he held the rank of Field Marshal. When the weather was wet, 200 to 300 grenadiers performed immaculate manoeuvres in the dining hall of his palace.²²

Because the prince was usually the only man in the State who could afford extravagance, a much-travelled man like Casanova in the 1750s found German towns were places of innocence and peace. Patriarchal manners dictated a simple and monotonous way of life, quiet and calm in its

pleasures, where sensuality was extinct.²³ The smaller the principality the greater the pride of caste. Service at court conferred rank if not necessarily nobility, but a title was usually purchased, or granted, to go with what was otherwise a sinecure. Goethe at the court of Saxe-Weimar was addressed as Herr Baron, but his nobility carried no more than the label. Nobles who had been, however undistinguished, noble for generations preserved their sense of distinction. One provincial aristocrat hoped that at the last judgment he would not have to appear with his inferiors, while another reprimanded the priest for baptising his child using the same holy water with which he had also baptised the children of commoners.²⁴ Frederick II, liberal in many other respects, preferred to have his nobles as army officers, on the grounds that they might be incompetent but they had a sense of honour they were determined to uphold.

As part of the mock panoply of power there was a proliferation of titles. Some were often sold to boost the revenue of smaller and more impecunious states, but others were lavished on courtiers, frequently in default of salaries. The court of the prince of Hildburg, a state of a bare 12 square kilometres, boasted a Court Marshal, a Grand Master of Stables, a Grand Master of the Hunt and a Grand Master of Forests. So prolific had become the spawn of minor nobles that the Knights of Malta insisted on 16 quarterings on the family coat of arms before admission of knights to the German Tongue of the Order. This proliferation of offices was paid for by the heavy oppression of helpless subjects, by pensions from France or Austria in return for neutrality or alliance in the case of war, and by the fees for providing mercenaries.

* * *

The ordinary Prussian soldier seemed to one observer, to live in terror. 'For the least fault', Boswell observed in Berlin, 'they were beat like dogs.'²⁵ New recruits were caned with increasing ferocity until they mastered their firelocks, like a British schoolboy stumbling over his parsing. Steadiness under arms was inculcated by rigid discipline and it was barely possible for a soldier to escape punishment for some infraction or other. Frederick II presided over this regime with the attention of a true martinet; even when dying he was wheeled to his sickbay window to

watch the drilling of his troops. It was made peculiarly difficult to desert from the ranks and a deserter was pursued like a beast of prey, peasants being rewarded for turning them in and savagely punished for not.²⁶ John Moore thought that ‘the common state of slavery in Asia or that to which people of civil professions in the most despotic countries are subject, is as freedom in comparison of this kind of military slavery.’²⁷

As well as a court of idle officials, a prince was expected to boast a mistress, or as in the case of Augustus the Strong, Elector of Saxony and King of Poland, two mistresses, one for each principality. To be *mâîtresse en titre* carried with it rewards in cash and often preferment for the husband, another drain upon the state, for a mistress, as opposed to a concubine, expected to be received at court and at the court of neighbouring princes, suitably bedizened by diamonds. The greatest enemy of royalty, especially the monarch of a Pumpnickel state, was boredom. Boswell saw ‘a certain joy in the faces of courtiers when strangers are announced’.²⁸ An egregious and facile conversationalist like Casanova found a last refuge from 1785 to 1798 as librarian to the Bohemian Count von Waldstein, but despite Boswell’s belief that strangers were welcomed as bearers of interesting intelligence, conversation was not held in particularly high regard in the smaller courts of Pumpnickel. Affairs of State were usually off limits, and affairs of international politics were too remote, so that affairs of the heart, of the bed, of the table and of the chase tended to fill the hours that were not spent eating or drinking, or in masquerades. ‘Being so much harassed with ceremony and form and cramped by the distance which birth throws between people’, wrote John Moore in 1786, ‘they are glad to seize every opportunity of assuming the mask and domino, that they may taste the pleasure of familiar conversation and social mirth.’²⁹ French observers found social conditions not far removed from savagery and they resolved to export French taste and culture as their ‘civilising mission’. They found a warm reception among the German princes. Being civilised gave them something interesting to do.

Most European princes had a passion for hunting whether actively pursued or as spectator sport, and in addition to their palaces they also erected hunting lodges adorned with all modern conveniences and Baroque finishings in or near their extensive forests. One duke, of Württemberg, established a chivalric order, named after St Hubert, the patron saint of