

ERICH KAHLER
TRANSLATED BY RICHARD WINSTON
AND CLARA WINSTON

The Inward Turn of Narrative



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BOLLINGEN SERIES LXXXIII



THE  NWARD
TURN OF NARRATIVE

ERICH KAHLER

Translated
from the German by
Richard & Clara
Winston

Foreword
by Joseph Frank



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*Durch alle Wesen reicht der eine Raum .
Weltinnenraum.*

—RILKE

Foreword

FEW CONTEMPORARIES could match Erich Kahler (1885-1970) in the immense erudition, the penetrating synoptic vision, and the responsive aesthetic sensibility that he brought to bear on the analysis of the modern world. The present small volume, the first to be published since Kahler's death, is a fine example of his achievement as a literary critic; but it is only a small sample of his life's work, much of it still untranslated into English. For Kahler belongs to the great German tradition of the polyhistor, the tradition whose origins go back to Herder and Hegel, and which has been continued up through the twentieth century by men like Oswald Spengler, Wilhelm Dilthey, Ernst Troeltsch, Max and Alfred Weber, Karl Jaspers, and Ernst Cassirer. Erich Kahler belongs with these great names of the impressive German tradition destroyed by Hitler; and it is only in relation to this tradition that his work can be properly appreciated.

What marks out this line of writers and thinkers is the universality of their ambitions, and their admirable ability to master the intellectual resources necessary to carry these ambitions through. All are inspired by a vision of the *unity* of human history (history seen primarily in terms of cultural forms, whether of science, art, religion, or philosophy—the history, in other words, of an enlarged and modernized version of Hegel's Absolute Spirit), and all undertake to portray the grand sweep of this unity on a majestic scale. Erich Kahler's *Man the Measure*, the major work which he wrote and published

in English after his arrival in the United States, is a book which fits squarely into this tradition, and displays a remarkable mastery of the most diverse fields of knowledge as well as the power to mold this vast material into an illuminating and organic conceptual synthesis. Kahler's book, in a certain sense, may indeed be considered a culmination of this tradition. For what he argues, and undertakes to demonstrate, is that the whole course of history itself has been advancing to the *self-consciousness* of the actual and ever-growing social-political unity of mankind which the tradition had previously accepted only as a philosophical postulate.

Another important facet of this German tradition of philosophical history is its acute feeling for the symptoms of cultural crisis. Implicit in its ambition to encompass *all* history, of course, is an awareness of the rise and fall of civilizations and the inevitable flux of historical change. Such an awareness derives from its own origins at the end of the eighteenth century, when all observers could sense the imminent collapse of the Christian-classical civilization that had dominated Europe since the Renaissance. The great works of this school, beginning with Herder's *Ideas on the Philosophy of History of Mankind* and Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, were all attempts to deal with the crisis of culture posed by this collapse, and to offer some basis for its reconstruction and renewal (or at least some intellectual consolation) in the face of the major social and economic transformations that were wiping out the old order for good. This task, needless to say, became more and more pressing and more and more difficult as the nineteenth century wore on; by the twentieth century it had begun to seem almost impossible. But the writings of this school, nonetheless, continued to supply the Western world with the

deepest and most powerful diagnoses of its own spiritual maladies.

To verify this assertion, one has only to open the pages of Erich Kahler's *The Tower and the Abyss*—a work which will unquestionably remain as a classic expression and analysis of the situation of modern culture in the years immediately following the Second World War, when the revelation of the Nazi concentration camps and the horror of the holocaust were still fresh in everyone's mind. Like his close friend and admirer, Thomas Mann, whose superb *Doctor Faustus* is the greatest work of art to have emerged from the agony of German (and Western) culture during the Hitler years, so Erich Kahler devoted himself to studying the same phenomena from the point of view of the cultural historian. The result is a book whose disquieting insights earned the praise of such disparate figures as T. S. Eliot and Lewis Mumford, and which, twenty years after its publication, still has more to tell us about modernity than the clamorous vociferations of the new breed of publicity-intellectuals preaching the gospel of salvation through electronic voodoo and multimedia pandemonium.

What has occurred, as Erich Kahler explains, is the steady evolution of consciousness in the direction of the demythification and secularization of wider and wider areas of human life. Since the end of the eighteenth century, this process has been accompanied by the transformation of the human environment through the practical applications of scientific discovery, i.e., technology. Mankind—or at least that part of it living in advanced industrial society—has thus become detached from the ancient certainties provided by religion and cultural tradition; it lives mentally and physically in a universe it has not yet learned how to assimilate emotionally. The

spiritual crisis of the modern era is precisely this gap between the mind of the human species and its psyche. In *The Tower and the Abyss*, Kahler chronicles the course of this estrangement, this self-alienation of the modern spirit (these words, now debased to the level of a mindless slogan, have an exact significance in his pages), with broad and graphic strokes, and he finds reflections of this condition in a distressingly wide span of material.

Beginning with the stylistic developments of modern art and literature, Kahler details the gradual loss of contact with the natural world of common-sense experience observable in all of the greatest products of the modern artistic sensibility. Characteristic of this culture, as a result of the impact of the ever-increasing rationalization and mechanization of life, is the exploration of the unconscious, the new awareness of the existential fragility and meaninglessness of existence, and, as a desperate reaction, the frenzy of nihilistic negation which began with Italian futurism and continued in dada and surrealism. (Kahler's book was written before the more recent explosion of pop culture on the international scene, which carries this movement to a paroxysm of cultural masochism and destructive self-hatred; but he has dealt with it in his undeservedly neglected *The Disintegration of Form in the Arts* [1968], a remarkable performance for a man over eighty, and one of the few attempts to grapple with this development in a spirit both comprehensive and severely critical at the same time.) In any case, what makes *The Tower and the Abyss* so revealing and so frightening is that Kahler shows how the same historical factors which can be used to explain the subtlest features of avant-garde art can also be seen at work in the abominable monstrosities of the Nazi concentration-camp world. Both reveal, in different ways, the breakup of the human personality caused by the historical evolution

of consciousness—a consciousness severed (ironically enough, by its own achievements) from the unconscious sources of value which, in the past, have always sustained the coherence of the human personality.

Art has always stood at the center of Erich Kahler's world as the most sensitive seismograph of the state of the cultural psyche. This is hardly surprising for a man as closely involved as he himself was with some of the greatest figures in modern German literature. A devoted friend of Rilke's; a member of the Stefan George group, though always harboring reservations about the anti-democratic tendencies of the *Kreis*; an intimate of Thomas Mann's, particularly during their years of common residence in Princeton; the man who shared Hermann Broch's loneliness and solitude in the United States for many years, and in whose home Broch lived (I shall never forget Kahler casually reaching under the couch in his study one day to pull out a dusty typescript copy of *Der Tod des Vergil*, with a dedicatory poem); the cherished correspondent of the most gifted, tragic, and haunted figure of the new generation of German poets, Paul Celan, who wrote to Kahler out of the blue one day after reading one of his articles—these are some of the people who found in him a spirit that could measure up to their own. One should also add that, as a hobby, Kahler made superb translations into German of the modern English poetry (Yeats in particular) that he had grown to love. It is little wonder that Kahler's literary criticism (his essays collected in *Die Verantwortung des Geistes*, his pioneering study of *Die Philosophie Hermann Brochs*, his definitive essay *Stefan George, Grösse und Tragik*) should instantly have been recognized as of permanent importance. The same is true for the splendid series of essays on the history of narrative which have now been rendered into English.

The outstanding merits of this work will be immediately clear to any reader; but he should also know that Kahler's book fills a genuine gap in the critical literature. For despite the importance of the novel as a form in the last two centuries, there are, surprisingly, very few works that attempt to treat the history of the genre as a whole. Special studies abound, to be sure, and some of them, like Ian Watt's *Rise of the Novel*, are of great value. But such works are usually limited to one or another national literature, or, like the noteworthy *The Nature of Narrative* by Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, are more concerned with general categories than with history. John Dunlop's *History of Fiction* (1845) is little more than a compendium of plots. Frederick Warren's turn-of-the-century *A History of the Novel Previous to the Seventeenth Century* (a stimulating book that should be rescued from oblivion) is written by an American scholar with a sharp eye for the sociology of literature and who has little to learn from the Marxists; but it is now sadly out of date. There is thus no recent work which surveys the history of narrative up through the end of the eighteenth century in as magisterial a fashion as Kahler's, and which handles all the major problems with a comparable grasp. Only Ortega y Gasset's *Meditations on Don Quixote*, with its brilliant remarks on the relation of the epic to the novel, may perhaps be mentioned as of similar stature; but Ortega makes no pretensions to Kahler's historical sweep.

To be sure, not all of Kahler's emphases and ideas will go uncontested, especially in Anglo-American criticism. The importance he accords to *Gulliver's Travels* and to *Tristram Shandy*, for example, are likely to strike English readers as quite out of kilter. One reason for this discrepancy is that Kahler is writing partly within the context of German literature and with reference to the

German Romantic novel; here the influence of Sterne is much greater than in the English or French nineteenth-century novel. *Gulliver's Travels* appeals to Kahler because he discusses the seventeenth century in terms of the new modes of perception inaugurated by the era of scientific discovery; and Swift not only later produced the greatest narrative work employing these new modes, but also used them to reveal the dehumanizing possibilities of science itself in a prophetic fashion. Swift's relevance to modernity is what gives his book importance for Kahler; the same is also true for Sterne, the precursor of the stream-of-consciousness and the experiments with time so typical of the modern novel.

Indeed, one of the most original features of Kahler's book is that he draws his line of historical continuity, not from the nineteenth-century novel of realism as the presumptive culmination of the form, but from the fractured perspectives and heavily conceptualized creations of the contemporary epic. In this respect, Kahler's work is truly the first *modern* attempt to come to grips with the subject, and to carry out, for the history of the novel, T. S. Eliot's injunction constantly to reorganize the history of the artistic past in terms of the masterworks of the present. This should stimulate, if not a rethinking of the more conventional point of view, then at least a good deal of controversy.

Also, at a time when the cry has gone up in Anglo-American criticism to relate literature once again to the wider horizons of life, the example of Kahler should prove a potent and productive stimulus. For Kahler views the internalization of narrative—the movement from external action and epic adventure to the ever-deeper and more intense exploration of character and personality—as part of the general evolution of human consciousness as a whole. The history of civilization in

all its aspects is constantly at his fingertips, and brought to bear at each new twist and turn of the road; but this does not mean that artistic values are discounted, ignored, or deprecated. There is no conflict for Kahler between the closest attention to matters of form and the widest ranging awareness of the historical pressures that condition both formal changes and thematic novelty: and this is as it should be.

I have now said everything I think necessary on this occasion about Kahler the historian and literary critic; but I cannot resist the opportunity to conclude these remarks with a few words about Erich Kahler the man as I came to know him in his later years. For Erich Kahler was a remarkable human being, a person of great kindness, human warmth, and an overflowing generosity of spirit.

Nothing about him at all, as might perhaps be supposed, suggested a stiff and self-important German *Gelehrter*. On the contrary, the absolute simplicity and spontaneity of his manner and demeanor contrasted oddly, and very appealingly, with what one knew of his formidable culture and his intellectual achievements. There was something endearingly childlike about him, even in, and perhaps particularly because of, the ripeness of his years—an impression which derived from the direct emotional immediacy of his responsiveness, and his unquenchable zest for, and enjoyment of, life. To watch Erich Kahler eat a lobster, as I once did during a memorable lunch at an open-air restaurant on Cape Cod, was both a lesson in the anatomy of crustaceans and a sheer pleasure at participating in a life-giving and life-enhancing ritual. Both the irresistible *joie de vivre* and the natural capacity to raise this to the level of a dis-

criminating and civilized connoisseurship were typical of the man and part of his charm.

There is a simplicity of youth, of innocence, and of naïveté; and, to use a phrase of the French poet Yves Bonnefoy, there is what can be called *la seconde simplicité*, the simplicity which comes when the bitter lessons of life have taught one to unlearn all that is merely factitious, superfluous, and socially imposed. Erich Kahler's simplicity was of this second kind, and what had remained with him was the pure essence of a soul of the very mildest and gentlest temper (in the full, original meaning of the word "gentle," signifying not only sweetness of disposition but also elevation of character). As Thomas Mann wrote in 1945, on the occasion of Erich Kahler's sixtieth birthday, his heart was "one of the warmest, wisest and most willing to give aid."

People streamed in to see him from all over the world—in such profusion, indeed, that in his later years his friends would often remonstrate with him at the exhausting expense of time and energy involved. But he would always reply, with the shy and guilty smile of a little boy being rebuked for some minor breach of etiquette, and with a helpless shrug of his shoulders, that his friends were of course right, but still, there might be something he could do and some way he could help; one never knew in advance. Just a few days before his death, when I saw him in the hospital for the last time, he spoke not of himself but, with his hands clasped before him as if in prayer, and with a passion that made his voice tremble and tears come to his eyes, of the terrible psychic burden—the burden of being both a great German poet and a young Central European Jew growing up in the shadow of the concentration camps—which had led to the suicide of Paul Celan.

Erich Kahler's ideal, his hope for the future, was a utopian and communitarian one—not so very far removed, really, from that of the present groping experiments among the youth, but of how different a moral substance! And he loved to dwell on the accomplishments of groups such as the Israeli kibbutzim and various communal experiments in France in restoring a lost equilibrium and harmony to human life even under the most extreme and adverse conditions. "We must . . . establish the human community in our own sphere," he wrote in the first essay in *Untergang und Übergang*, his last volume. "Only if we establish a human community can humanity as a whole be saved." Whether this ideal is more than utopian only the future can tell; but one found it very easy to believe in the presence of Erich Kahler himself. For while he never said one word about any of this in private conversation, the infectious radiance of his personality succeeded in creating around him the sort of community of which he dreamed. He had truly established the human community in his own human sphere; one could believe in it because it existed there, and with him.

Those who were privileged to belong to this community—the community of the friends of Erich Kahler—will always remember him with love, and will never cease to honor and revere his memory.

JOSEPH FRANK

Translators' Note

Die Verinnerung des Erzählens first appeared in *Die Neue Rundschau* 68 (1957) and 70 (1959). It was reprinted in the paperback collection *Untergang und Übergang* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1970). The present translation has been made from a revised version that Erich Kahler was preparing in the last months of his life. He made a number of minor corrections and additions, eliminated one very long footnote, and rewrote the introductory remarks so that they would form a preface. Had he been able to follow his usual practice, he would have worked closely with the translators on the English version, suggesting alternatives, recommending simplifications, often reconceiving whole passages because his fine attunement to English enabled him to think differently in his adopted language. It is our loss and the reader's that this collaboration is no longer possible.

Several different versions of the Preface were found among Erich Kahler's papers. The translators wish to express their gratitude to Alice Kahler and Theodore Ziolkowski for their help in establishing the author's final intentions.

Unless otherwise indicated in the notes, the English versions of quoted French and German texts are our own.

RICHARD AND CLARA WINSTON

Acknowledgment

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THE INWARD TURN OF NARRATIVE

Preface

MY PURPOSE here is to show the vast changes in the modern novel as the consequence of a process that has been at work throughout the whole history of Western man. That process is the transformation of man's reality, of which the transformation in the forms of art is one expression. If we wish to understand what has happened to the novel, we must grasp both the transformation of our reality and the transformation within man's consciousness. Literary history will be considered here as an aspect of the history of consciousness.

Art is more than art, literature more than literature. The arts are forms of expression for human life and experience, and as such they register changes in the condition of man over the ages. But they are also more than forms of expression, and they do more than merely register. By giving expression to latent reality, and thus bringing it to consciousness, they make wholly real what has been only potential. They create the cultural atmosphere of each given age. And by virtue of this function they play as active a part in man's development as other, seemingly more practical human activities such as science, technology, and politics. The evolution of artistic forms of expression is one of the most important evidences we have for the changes in man's consciousness and the changes in the structure of his world. Only when viewed in terms of this dualistic aspect—the development of consciousness and the development of the reality corresponding to it—do the arts gain their full human significance.

The transformation of man's consciousness and the transformation of the reality that this consciousness must deal with combine into a single coherent process. In fact, man himself has developed by means of the perpetual interaction between consciousness and reality, between his interior world and his exterior world. As a result of the growth of consciousness, man's outer world expands and changes. The reality in which man moves and which he must manipulate changes in extent and character. And his experiencing a changed reality in turn propels consciousness onward. The world we experience today is a dynamic one, and we can no longer close our minds to the idea that man, the human race, has a life-span and undergoes the changes of age even as an individual does. Early, mature, and highly civilized man are not the same man; their consciousness is not the same. And similarly, the reality of classical antiquity, of the Middle Ages, of the Renaissance, of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries is not the same reality.

The dramatic event we call "the arts" takes place in the arena of this interaction between consciousness and reality. The arts, moreover, are far more intensively and directly involved in this interaction than science, technology, or economics. The various spheres of human action are related in multifarious ways; for they are after all differing expressions of one and the same life. Naturally they exert mutual influence upon one another. But even more significant is the fact that these differing human activities display the most astonishing parallels in their peculiar, formally independent and specifically technical developments. The arts, for example, in pursuing their own particular courses have arrived at the same disintegration and transcendental obliteration of the objective world of the senses as has physics—and at the very same time. The same evolution of consciousness

and of the reality corresponding to that consciousness can be demonstrated in the most variegated kinds of human expression—and consequently in the transformation of art forms as well. Here I intend to demonstrate it by changes in the forms of narrative.

Every development moves in a definite direction. The direction of the interacting development of consciousness and reality is shown in the following pages to be a progressive internalization of events, an increasing displacement of outer space by what Rilke has called inner space, a stretching of consciousness. This in turn brings with it an incorporation, an internalization, of more and more of the objective world—which means taking in a wider range of the world, and plumbing it more deeply. In penetrating into unexplored strata of reality, consciousness transforms that reality. Thus consciousness changes its world and changes itself. In a much higher and more complex sense the process resembles what happens in a child who tries to master wider and wider circles of his external world. By his efforts to organize that world he becomes aware of his own inner world as a coherent self. By objectification of the outer world he takes possession of his inner world. And in the course of distinguishing and detaching the self, the great confrontation begins between the inner and the outer world, between consciousness and reality. The inner world opens up in a twofold manner—in feeling, ever richer sensibility, and also in rational, intellectual grasp. Thus the inner world becomes increasingly packed with material from the outer world, and in its turn exerts a transforming effect upon the outer world it has acquired.

The great dual process of internalization of reality takes place analogously in the human species. Realms of the external world which were previously obscure, with which man communicated naïvely and unconsciously,