Gustav Freytag and the Prussian Gospel

Novels, Liberalism, and History

von
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Introduction

To a remarkable extent, the historical debate over the place of Gustav Freytag in German literature and history would be prefigured in the obituary notices that appeared in the German and European press immediately upon his death. For example, Felix Poppenburg, writing in the 11 May 1895 edition of Das Magazin für Litteratur judged that the author would be remembered primarily as a nationalist writer:

Freytags Monument wird [...] nicht in den internationalen Pantheon der großen Menscheitsdichter gestellt werden, sondern in die nationale Ehrenhalle, die das deutsche Volk seinen großen Bürgern errichtet. Er war wohl Künstler, höher stand ihm seine Aufgabe des Reformators und Regenerators. [...] Diese seine Lebensaufgabe löste er nicht mit seinen Dramen, sondern mit seinem großen Prosarbeiten, den Romanen [erwähnt wird besonders Soll und Haben]. Niemand wird ihm je den Ehrennamen abstreitig machen können, der auf sein Monument gehört und der am knappsten die Vielseitigkeit und Einseitigkeit seines Wesens zugleich erklärt: Praeceptor Germania.¹

On the other hand, Franz Mehring saw Freytag, above all, as the product of a particular social group and a particular time. Mehring, citing Freytag’s significance as a spokesman for the political aspirations of the mid-century Prussian bourgeoisie, saw Gustav Freyag as a literary anachronism:

In Gustav Freytag, der gestern, nahezu achtzigjährig, in Wiesbaden gestorben ist, hat die deutsche Bourgeoisie, um einen ihrer Lieblingsausdrücke zu gebrauchen, einen “repräsentiven Mann” verloren. Eine gewisse Periode ihrer Entwicklung spiegelt sich nirgends so treu wider wie in Freytags historischen, poetischen und politischen Schriften. Er war die Periode von 1850 bis 1870; um

Outside Germany, readers of the 1 May 1895 edition of *The Times* of London encountered a lengthy obituary notice primarily concerned with an evaluation of Gustav Freytag’s place in European literature. Among German writers of the second half of the century, only Gustav Freytag and his colleague Berthold Auerbach enjoyed enough popularity in Britain to merit such attention from the august pages of *The Times*. The anonymous reviewer noted that Freytag’s literary production “has been voluminous, but little of it, with the exception of *Soll und Haben*, is likely to be enduring.” The reviewer conceded the popularity of the novel, but noted that the work “has the fault common to all Freytag’s work, and, indeed, to the work of most of his German contemporaries – prolixity.”

After thus disposing of Freytag’s accomplishments as a novelist, *The Times* noted that the author was a “many sided” writer who produced comedies, dramas, journalism and history. In the opinion of the reviewer, the result of all this labor on his part, was “a profusion of newspaper articles of no particular mark.” In an obituary notice remarkable for consistent criticism and faint praise, *The Times* went on to note that his brief career as a parliamentarian in the North German Reichstag indicated that the author also “lacked aptitude” for political affairs. The fact that the author attempted such a wide variety of literary modes did not give evidence of versatility; but rather “that curious instability of purpose which marked his whole career.” *The Times* concluded that Freytag’s reputation must ultimately rest on *Soll und Haben* – that “strangely realistic” tale of commerce that had enchanted German and British readers since its appearance in 1855.

The lukewarm evaluation of Gustav Freytag’s career that appeared in *The Times* prefigured the judgment of many students of

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3 “Gustav Freytag.” *The Times* (London), 1 May 1895.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.
European literature in the 20th century. One recent evaluation of *Soll und Haben* notes that the novel is unlikely to have been read by younger Germanists and asserted that “if we take it as literature, this implied criticism by neglect is as it should be.” Eda Sagarra judged him to be “a typical example of the *Bildungsphilister*, continually using the expressions of earlier writers, especially Goethe, as if they were his own.”

Nevertheless, Gustav Freytag has been the subject of a growing debate among Germanists in the last two decades. Germanists have turned to Freytag as an exemplar in a heated debate over the problem of German literary realism. This discussion seeks to explain the apparent divergence of German literature from the norms of European realism in the decades between the failure of the Revolution of 1848 and the breakdown of the tradition in the 1890s. A good deal of the debate concerns the failure of the German social novel to achieve a level of mimetic description of social reality comparable with the work of French, British, and Russian contemporaries. Germanists have concluded that the failure of German realism in a literary sense is ultimately attributable to the burden of its political message. Whether defined as “bourgeois realism,” or “programmatic realism,” the German novel of realism was dragged down by the weight of its ideological program. Eda Sagarra summed up the argument in this way:

Much of the criticism leveled at nineteenth-century German realism derives from the fact that it is not naively mimetic. [...] Unlike their European contemporaries, they tried to represent the ethical rather than the social or political import of the revolutions they witnessed. [...] It was not simply that they were unsuccessful in capturing the attention of the public for what they wrote, but that the type of work which the educated middle classes admired was so very inferior.

Freytag’s *Soll und Haben* has often been cited as the classic exemplar of the peculiar form of German realism. Although many fruitful lines

9  Ibid. 218–19.
of discussion regarding Freytag’s place in German letters during the
unification era have emerged from this debate, one result has been that
the rest of Freytag’s literary production has been overlooked. Gustav
Freytag was, in many ways, the victim of his own success. It is
certainly true that Soll und Haben has overshadowed his historical
works.

While students of German literature have been exploring the
connections between realism and ideology, historians have preferred
the empirical approach in discussing Gustav Freytag’s significance.
During the 1960s and 1970s historians like Louis L. Snyder, George
Mosse, and Peter Gay have mined the works of popular writers like
Freytag to analyze a “German Mind” that diverged significantly from
that of its Western neighbors. In its crudest form, this approach can be
summed up as the “Martin Luther to Adolf Hitler” school. In short, a
number of historians have examined the writings of important German
artists for evidence of antisemitic or “proto-nazi” attitudes. Gustav
Freytag has been indicted by a number of observers on the grounds
that his novels, above all Soll und Haben, helped make public expres-
sion of antisemitic attitudes acceptable to the sort of cultivated
bourgeois audience that read his works. This approach has the fault of
allowing meaning to Freytag’s life and work only in so far as they
serve to explain, however tenuously, the events of the Third Reich.
David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley have rightly described this
approach as Nazi pedigree hunting. It has been my intention in this
work to see Freytag as his contemporaries saw him.

The purpose of this study is to discuss Gustav Freytag’s career in
its proper political context. That context was the emerging liberal,
national movement of the unification era. As a novelist and as a
historian of German culture, Gustav Freytag worked to achieve a
unified Germany under the guidance of a reformed Prussia. In short,
Freytag was a nationalist and, at times, a very robust nationalist
indeed. The thesis of this study is that the historian is as worthy of
attention as the novelist; in fact, his novels and cultural history express
the same liberal national program. His place in German history is not
that of a solitary artist and social critic given to unfortunate nationalist
or antisemitic outbursts; but rather a member of the politically active
elite of academic historians and liberal publicists who wrote in the
service of the national cause. Richard Hamman and Jost Hermand probably did not have had Gustav Freytag specifically in mind when they characterized the political and cultural atmosphere of the German Gründerzeit:

“Dazu kommt, und das ist noch bezeichnender für die Zeit, daß sich die Literaten und Künstler selbst als Kämpfer fühlen und eine Kampfstellung beziehen, bei der sich die Feder zum Speer verwandelt, ja die Polemik über das eigentliche Schaffen triumphiert.”

This evaluation neatly applies to much of Freytag’s journalism, as well as to Soll und Haben.

No other generation in German history so firmly believed that the laws of history were developing so favorably for their goals. Gustav Freytag was a significant novelist, but he was also a liberal historian and spokesman for the politically conscious members of the North German history profession. In this study, we characterize Freytag’s political position as “the Prussian Gospel.” This term is meant to convey that Prussian liberals like Freytag combined loyalty to the monarchy with the firm belief that the dynamic machinery of the Prussian state could ultimately ensure progressive goals. Their formula, popular monarchy and state power, seemed the key to a harmonious capitalist society. This belief underlay the triumphalism of the Gründerzeit as well as the domestic political disappointments of the Bismarck era. Both themes are to be found in the writings of Gustav Freytag.

The focus of my investigation will therefore lie in the area of historiography and politics. In my view, Gustav Freytag’s politics as well as his anti-Jewish critique should both be seen as broadly liberal. We will discuss this argument in some detail in Chapter Three. Although his nationalism and “Prussianism” cast a shadow over his liberalism, it would be anti-historical as well as a gross injustice

simply to relegate Freytag to the forces of illiberalism within the German Empire. Freytag consistently supported liberal values such as freedom of speech and freedom of the press; he favored representative government and constitutional checks upon the political power and social domination of the Junkertum. He was a strong critic of political censorship. Above all, Freytag and his fellow liberals saw themselves firmly on the side of progress, economic growth, and a reasonable, kleindeutsch solution to the “German Question.”

Ultimately, my goal has been to recapture and explore the mental world of a significant German historian. It has not been my intention to write biography, but I have included some biographical material in the hope of placing Gustav Freytag within his social circle. From the perspective of this study, the most important figures in that social milieu will be drawn from the academic world rather than the literary. The next chapter of the book is a brief but critical biographical sketch of the author’s family background and education drawn largely from his own autobiographical account. In Chapter Two we turn to Soll und Haben to examine the social and political critique it contains. In Chapter Three, I will examine the familiar charge of antisemitism leveled against the author. In the following four chapters, we will examine Gustav Freytag’s place within German historiography by focusing on two key works, the novel Die verlorene Handschrift, which contains his deepest consideration of the mission of the historian, and his great work of cultural history, Bilder aus der deutschen Vergangenheit. In a chronological sense, with the exception of his late Erinnerungen aus meinem Lebe, this study will examine Freytag’s writing between 1848 and 1870. We will in essence take the author on his own terms, and limit our inquiry to the public phase of his career. On the other hand, we will also try to reach a balanced view of Freytag’s political thinking and his evaluation of the political reality of the German Empire by examining his correspondence. Although Freytag the novelist figures prominently in this study, our primary objective will be to evaluate Freytag the historian.