Gottfried Keller, Die Leute von Seldwyla

Kritische Studien - Critical Essays

von
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The idea of a volume of critical essays on Keller’s *Die Leute von Seldwyla* was inspired by some recent events: 2006 saw the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the publication of the first volume of the Seldwyla novellas and it seems appropriate to celebrate this anniversary with a collection of essays that reassess these stories from today’s perspective. Keller continues to have universal appeal; his novellas appear among the fifty essential works comprising the canon of German literature, as published in the literary supplement celebrating the sixtieth anniversary of *Die Zeit*. The most prominent development in recent Keller research was the appearance of the *Historisch-Kritische Ausgabe* of Keller’s work, with the publication of both volumes of *Die Leute von Seldwyla* in 2000, edited by a team of experts under the guidance of Walter Morgenthaler. All our contributors have used this new edition when quoting from the novellas.

When announcing our project of critical essays, the editors had little concept of the range of contributors and scope of papers that would be offered. In the event, scholars from different countries and from varying backgrounds contributed to this volume: some were established Keller experts, others were just entering the field of Keller research. The topics under discussion in this volume reflect the trends and interests current in today’s *Germanistik*. A brief *Gedankenexperiment* will illustrate this. Had this volume been published some thirty years ago, contributors would have focused on the social upheaval of contemporary European politics, making reference to Karl Marx and his analysis of the new age of capitalism. Moving on a decade, our potential contributors would have analysed the important role which women played in Keller’s life and how this was reflected in the Seldwyla stories. While there is some comment on this topic in the current volume, it is perhaps surprising that no one offered a
detailed study of the women of Seldwyla, given their prominence in Keller’s work. As recently as a decade ago, colleagues would have invoked Sigmund Freud with a discussion of some psychological interpretation of life in this utopian or maybe rather dystopian community. When this volume of essays began to take shape, a rather different priority in the approach to Keller and his collection of novellas began to emerge. Of the twelve contributions, three have a specifically economic agenda, reflecting the current interest in such themes and related topics in literature, while several other essays made some reference to economic issues.

In general, this choice of topic suggests a novel and unconventional approach to Keller research. Martin Swales represents the more established school of literary criticism, which is not to say that his essay is restricted by traditional conventions. His contribution investigates the ‘unreflective stenography’ of material facts, the need for ‘redundant description’. By examining passages of ‘redundant’ detail in *Pankraz, der Schmoller, Romeo und Julia auf dem Dorfe, Die mißbrauchten Liebesbriefe* and *Kleider machen Leute* and with reference to similar work by other authors, basing his analysis on the theories of Roland Barthes and J. P. Stern, Swales illustrates how such passages often generate a climate of heightened reflectivity.

The essay by Alan Corkhill discusses Keller’s frequent references to *Glück* in its diverse semantic connotations, investigating the interplay between *Glück* as good fortune/luck and happiness as an inner state in both sets of *Seldwyla* novellas, with particular emphasis on *Pankraz der Schmoller, Romeo und Julia auf dem Dorfe, Kleider machen Leute* and *Der Schmied seines Glückes*. Corkhill examines the extent to which the protagonists attain happiness in love and marriage (*felicitas*) and in material wellbeing (*prosperitas*) by taking full advantage of propitious circumstances or by minimising unhappiness (*Unglück*) in the face of bad luck. Keller’s ‘theology of *Diesseitigkeit*’, however, lends little credence to the Augustinian concept of heavenly bliss (*Glückseligkeit/beatitudo*) and at best refers to a secularised use of the term *selig*. Corkhill also explores the nexus between happiness and a widespread desire for *Ruhe* (repose), as well as the recurrence of laughter and smiling as the outward manifestation of a state of serenity.
Hans-Joachim Hahn’s article, Die Tücke des Objekts, approaches the subject–object relationship in these narratives from a broader, literary and philosophical angle. While authors in the early nineteenth century endowed their heroes with freedom and responsibility, the generation of Keller sees the individual protagonist as a victim of forces beyond their control. This observation, however, will be seen to apply only in general terms and to some of the novellas; in other instances the characters manage to reassert themselves over a world of seemingly absolute objective power. Yomb May, by comparison, remains more firmly within the traditional conventions of literary history. He views Keller’s novellas as characteristic for the period of poetic realism and proceeds to discuss these stories from both an historical and poetological background. May draws comparisons with Fontane, Storm and Ludwig, each faced with finding a balance between the ‘objective’ world of reality and the writer’s demands for an adequate artistic representation.

Stefan H. Kern, Jörg Kreienbrock and Uwe Seja discuss the novellas with reference to economic issues, taking the two prefaces as their starting point. All three authors approach their topic in a slightly different manner. While Seja makes full use of his expertise as an economist in investigating the narratives’ engagement with contemporary economic thought, Kreienbrock’s approach is more speculative. In exploring the relationship between economics and literature, he discusses the dialectics between society and individual in the Seldwyla Kreditparadies, illustrating how individual characters cannot escape their origins, be this Seldwyla or the credibility issues. Kern focuses particularly on the two prefaces, since they are not merely the traditional frame to a collection of narratives, as with Boccacio and other story tellers, but determine the milieu in an economic, social and historical sense which provides insights into Keller’s own outlook. All three authors apply their findings to a variety of stories, in particular to Pankraz, der Schmoller, Frau Regel Amrain und ihr Jüngster, Kleider machen Leute, Der Schmied seines Glücks and Das verlorene Lachen.

Other essays focus on individual novellas and Kleider machen Leute proved by far the most popular choice. Catherine Watts ‘Intertextual Explorations’ provides an easy access to Keller and the
German tradition of *Novelle*. Based on particular features of this nineteenth-century genre, she establishes eleven criteria for the classical *Novelle*, moving on to explore the poststructural concept of intertextuality. She establishes interesting tensions between the genre as such and related textual models which serve to indicate that no single genre can be entirely self contained.

In pronounced contrast to Watts, Rüdiger Görner’s essay on *Kleider machen Leute* takes a broader, philosophical perspective. By relating clothes to literary metaphors and architectural features and by drawing on the strong tradition of man’s need for a covering or disguise, in writers as far apart as Lichtenberg, Herder, Swift and Thomas Carlyle, he develops a most fascinating dialectics between the ontology of appearance and make-believe, which in turn undermines any ontological prospect. Continuing the theme of disguise and subterfuge, Julia Augart explores *Die mißbrauchten Liebesbriefe* as an epistolary satire, analysing the various forms of duplicity generated by this literary triangle. She illustrates how, sometimes, the medium of the letter can serve to resolve a most intricate social problem.

Deborah Holmes investigates Keller’s pedagogical views, with special reference to *Frau Regel Amrain*, but also to *Die drei gerechten Kammacher* and to *Kleider machen Leute*. She brings to this study her observations from another of her research projects, the pedagogic reform movement of Eugenie Schwarzwald. It is notable that this early campaigner for women’s issues made ample use of Keller’s stories and found some of Keller’s women of particular interest for her concept of ‘natural’ education. While Keller cannot be described as a particularly progressive or modernist writer in matters of education and the human psyche, it is, nevertheless, remarkable that a woman of Schwarzwald’s stature chose his novellas as a model for her pedagogical programme.

Hahn’s second essay deals with Keller’s religious and political views, as illustrated by the fairy tale structure of the final narrative *Das verlorene Lachen*. He examines how the initially smiling faces of the happy couple in this novella fall victim to religious fanaticism and liberal economics and how their happiness, the laughter which has been lost, can only be recaptured in a world where humanity has become emancipated from religious doctrine and the dictates of
economic liberalism, in a utopian society, some quasi pre-industrial world, where the interests of the individual and the wellbeing of society are mutually compatible.

In editing the texts, we sought to achieve a combination of strict conformity and liberal individualism. While we tried to maintain a uniform approach to bibliographical details and general editorial matters, we were more relaxed when it came to general spelling, especially in German. Unfortunately, the new revised Rechtschreibreform, mark 2, introduced in August 2006, came too late for contributors to make full use of it and we therefore decided to continue with the current ‘plurality’ still in practical use. The Select Bibliography reflects only some of the books quoted by individual authors; specialised works relating to individual topics, being less relevant to the overall subject-matter, are usually omitted. A comprehensive index aims to cover the particular novellas discussed as well as the major themes developed therein; it will serve to assist readers to cross reference and compare different approaches to the individual narratives.

Finally, special thanks go to our publishers, Peter Lang, and in particular to their UK representative, Dr Graham Speake. His wise and patient advice and encouragement was of inestimable help. Without his support, the publication of this volume would have been much delayed and may well not have been possible.