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Abstract

Review of Robert Ellis. *Ernst Toller and German Society: Intellectuals as Leaders and Critics 1914-1939*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2013.

Keywords

Ernst Toller, Intellectuals as Leaders, Weimar Republic, communalism

Robert Ellis. *Ernst Toller and German Society: Intellectuals as Leaders and Critics 1914-1939*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2013. ix + 239 pp.

Robert Ellis gives a good indication of his interests and intent in the title of his monograph, *Ernst Toller and German Society: Intellectuals as Leaders and Critics 1914-1939*. He deals primarily with Ernst Toller the social critic and political activist, and less with Toller the dramatist and author. He views Toller in the context of his times, from World War I to May 1939, when Toller, despondent after the Republican defeat in the Spanish Civil War, committed suicide in exile in New York City. Ellis discusses the social reformer Toller against the background of the political and social upheaval and cultural and intellectual protest during this highly volatile period of German history. He is interested in the role of the intellectual in society, i.e., the intellectual not only as critic, but also as leader and instigator of change. Ellis's approach to Toller is that of an historian, not a literary critic; he emphasizes the usefulness of history for understanding literature (5).

The clash between politics and the intellectual is a major theme of the book. Ellis thus begins with a general discussion of the intellectual per se, whom he sees as a product of modernity. Common to intellectuals on both the Left and the Right are, as he works out, non-conformity with society, intellectual alienation, the refusal to ignore adverse socio-political conditions, and opposition. Ellis subsequently profiles the left-wing intellectuals of the Weimar Republic, identifying them as frequently Jewish, as cosmopolitan, estranged from society, as "prophets without honor" (20). He distinguishes between left-wing Weimar intellectuals of the *Geist* ('word'), i.e., writers and journalists who, like Kurt Tucholsky or Carl von Ossietzky, criticized society in publications, and intellectuals of action, who not only wrote but also physically took part in the 1918 revolution and its aftermath—as did Ernst Toller. Together with the socialist journalist Kurt Eisner and the social anarchist Gustav Landauer, Toller was a central figure in the "second revolution," the attempt in 1919 to establish a *Räterepublik* (Republic of Councils, following the Soviet model) in Bavaria.

In the following chapters, Ellis proceeds chronologically through Toller's life, documenting—always within the broader socio-political and cultural context—the evolution of Toller's character and worldview. It is a psychological, as well as a socio-political investigation. Ellis gives us an intimate view of Toller's personality, which alternated between energized idealism and exhilaration, on the one hand, and severe depression, on the other. Ellis presumes a bipolar disorder, especially in Toller's adult years (211), noting Toller's numerous psychiatric hospitalizations and his acute sensibility.

Born in 1893 of middle-class Jewish parents in the then Prussian (now Polish) village Samotschin, Toller sensed early on that, as a Jew, he was seen as "different" (33) in his German surroundings. This sense of alienation, according to Ellis, informed Toller's relationship to society and evoked a

lifelong feeling of loneliness. Ellis maintains that Toller's Jewish heritage accounts for his compelling desire for integration into the community (*Gemeinschaft*), not only for himself, but also for mankind as a whole. His Jewishness explains what Ellis calls the "messianic nature of his manner, as well as the chiliastic quality of much of his thought" (37).

In 1914 the young Toller, an ardent nationalist eager to prove his Germanness, immediately volunteered for military service. After 3½ years of artillery warfare and thirteen months at the front, he was discharged in 1917 as psychologically unfit for duty. His war years, the "single defining experience" of his life (42), transformed Toller—like so many other WWI soldiers—from nationalist to pacifist and socialist.

Here lie the origins of Toller's vision of a classless, humane society based on brotherly love: the brotherhood of man. The inner transformation of the individual was to bring about the transcendence of the old society to a more perfect communal world. In Toller's view, it was the duty of the intellectual to make his fellowmen conscious of their true, altruistic nature. Art and politics were to become one: *Geist* was to be united with political involvement, theory with practice. Toller depicted the struggle for this new communalism in his first (expressionist) play, *Wandlung (Transformation)*, written in 1917-18. It was to become the theme of all his subsequent plays.

In his attempt to establish the Bavarian Soviet-style Council in 1919, Toller saw his chance to realize his vision of a new society and the new man. He became a powerful orator for the cause: "In his speeches, he became almost a matinee idol of sorts, a rock star for the Munich proletariat" (88). He was chairman of the *Zentralrat* (Central Council) during the six-day existence of the *Räterepublik*, and even commanded a division of the revolutionary army against the government troops sent to put down the rebellion (114). Arrested and charged with treason, Toller spent the next five years (1919-1924) in prison, where he wrote several of his best-known plays: *Massemensch (Masses Man)* and *Hinkemann, Die Maschinenstürmer (The Machine Wreckers)*, among others. The highly politicized, explosive stagings of these plays in Berlin and other cities made the imprisoned Toller famous in Weimar Germany (136).

Ellis analyzes the prison plays and *Hoppla, wir leben (Hoppla, We're Alive)*, written in 1924 after his release, as reflections of Toller's alternating optimism and despair in regard to the realization of his hope for a new Germany. From the naive conviction of *Wandlung*, his most optimistic play, to the "almost unmitigated pessimism" (142) of *Hoppla, wir leben*, Toller portrays the struggle of his reformer protagonists to convince the uncomprehending, or even unwilling, masses. As Ellis summarizes, "For the next 20 years [after the failure of the Bavarian revolution], with his visions of a new Germany, Toller wandered pitifully, like a self-blinded Oedipus, unable to find that which he so ardently wished" (123).

Ellis's book is a thorough study of Toller's time and of Toller himself. The width and breadth of his knowledge of German culture is demonstrated with myriad references to people, ideas, influences, and the socio-political

circumstances of World War I and the interwar period. His writing is lucid; the text is well organized—the book is a pleasure to read. My one criticism is the lack of an index, which would have facilitated the cross-referencing of the many names, titles, and historical events.

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