Gustav Freytag, Excerpt from a Review of Recent German Novels (1853)

Abstract

Like Auerbach, Gustav Freytag (1816–1895) was a prominent and highly successful realist writer. In the following excerpt from a review of recent German novels, which was published in his own literary journal, *Die Grenzboten* (1853), Freytag presents a program for realist literature. He insists that authors had to observe reality closely and immerse themselves in life in order to produce works of "artistic truth and beauty."

Source

Is the world around us really so lacking in interesting figures, shocking events, and even great passions? Everywhere, in almost every sphere of human activity, in every corner of our fatherland, despite everything, life flows so abundantly and so energetically that anyone with a talent for representation and the will to become acquainted with life itself would never want for interesting ideas, impressions, and motifs. It is not that poets lack images of life that they can transform, but rather that they lack poetic power, eyes that know how to see, an education that understands life, and a sense of beauty that knows how to idealize it. If only just one of the novels written in Germany in the past year had been able to portray the vigorous, healthy, strong life of an educated human being—his struggles, his travails, his triumphs—in such a way that we could truly enjoy it! In reality, we have a great number of compelling characters among our farmers, merchants, industrialists, etc., whose life stories and circumstances would inspire the greatest human interest in those who got to know them. Why do we not have a poet who can do something analogous with his work? These great spheres of human activity—farming, trade, industry—are themselves the foundation for countless interesting and striking human relations, for stirring passions and the most remarkable entanglements. Why do our poets not take up their pens to present such real phenomena to us with artistic truth and beauty? The answer to this question is, unfortunately, because the majority of our novelists understand almost nothing about our own life, about the affairs of the modern world. Even J. Gotthelf, with all his creative power, would not have been in a position to compose his works had he not lived for years among the peasants and become acquainted with their households, their activities, their joys, and their sorrows, down to the smallest detail.

Most of our German poets take the liberty of portraying the hustle and bustle of the present without sufficiently knowing the activities of the people they wish to represent and the influence those activities have upon their soul and worldview. They still seek the poetic only in contrast to reality, as if our real life was somehow devoid of poetry and beauty. But there is much more poetic feeling in the life of every practical farmer or businessman, every active person who pursues interests with seriousness and persistence, than in those novels in which our authors juxtapose real life with shadowy heroes in the most improbable situations. Therefore, anyone who wants to write novels should make a small effort to himself be a competent person, which means to make himself at home in a sphere of human interest, through sustained and manly activity as a useful part of the great chain of powerful human beings.

Source: Gustav Freytag, "Deutsche Romane" [Review], in *Die Grenzboten* 12/1 (1853), pp. 77–80,

157–60; reprinted in Max Bucher, Werner Hal, Georg Jäger, and Reinhard Wittmann, eds., *Realismus und Gründerzeit: Manifeste und Dokumente zur deutschen Literatur 1848–1880.* 2 vols. Stuttgart: J. B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1975, vol. 2, pp. 71–72.

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