



LEONARD FORSTER

Leonard Wilson Forster 1913–1997

LEONARD FORSTER was born in St John's Wood, London, on 30 March 1913, during the lull that preceded the outbreak of the Great War. The significance of this particular birth date was, one suspects, not lost on him; indeed it was inevitably bound to have subtle implications for the life and outlook of a man who was to make his name as one of Britain's foremost twentieth-century German scholars. The bald facts of his early academic career are easy to convey. He won a scholarship to Trinity Hall, Cambridge, where in 1931 he began to read for the Modern and Mediaeval Languages Tripos. His schooling at Marlborough had been typical enough: it was the education of a boy with a solid Victorian and Edwardian background. His father, Edward James Forster, and one of his uncles ran a family business; others had joined the Indian Civil Service or gone out to Africa. His mother, Linda Charlotte, née Rogers, like many another girl of her background and generation, had spent some time in a German boarding-school, and never quite lost sight of an image of Germany very unlike the one that has prevailed in this country since 1914. It was with this inheritance that young Forster went up to Cambridge; but the three years of undergraduate life up until Finals, which he took in 1934, were ones that witnessed the transformation of Germany from the cultured and liberal society which in 1932 had jubilantly celebrated the centenary of Goethe's death to a totalitarian regime which, during Leonard Forster's student years, saw the appointment of Adolf Hitler as Reichskanzler in 1933 and his assumption of power as a fascist dictator after the 'night of the long knives' in June 1934.

Leonard Forster failed to gain a First. It was a set-back which made

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him all the more determined to take his interest in German studies further by embarking on doctoral research. To do so he adopted a course familiar to generations of British students of the subject: he obtained funding and academic status by gaining a Thomas Carlyle Scholarship and supplemented these by working as an English-language assistant in the English Department of a university or what is known as a *Lektor* in German. First he went to Leipzig University, but, in the old tradition of German students, such as Goethe before him, he soon moved on to Bonn, long a favourite among young Englishmen, and then to Königsberg at the opposite end of the country, in what was then East Prussia. His experiences in that erstwhile centre of the German Enlightenment, where Kant had once lectured, gave him a sobering first-hand insight into what was starting to take place within Germany's academic life. Paul Hankamer, his new professor at Königsberg, was an eminent scholar in the field in which Forster was becoming increasingly interested and had just published *Deutsche Gegenreformation und deutsches Barock. Die deutsche Literatur im Zeitraum des siebzehnten Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart, 1935), a pioneering and authoritative survey of German baroque literary culture in relation to the art and ideology of the Counter-Reformation; but now he was forced out of office for political reasons. Like Hankamer's book, Hankamer's dismissal taught him that all things are subject to the whims of fickle fortune, and that the political and cultural history of a past era can suddenly acquire a new and startling relevance. Before he had seriously embarked on his own lifelong academic career, the future Schröder Professor of German at the University of Cambridge had already learnt that the ivory tower of academe is not immune to the world outside it, and that an academic post is not necessarily a job for life.

Leonard Forster left National Socialist Germany for Switzerland, and it was there, in Basle, the city of the ironic humanist, Erasmus, and the great historian of Renaissance culture, Jakob Burckhardt, that he got down to some hard work on the dissertation for which the University of Basle awarded him its Dr. Phil. in 1938. The subject he chose for his research, the German poet Georg Rudolf Weckherlin (1584–1653), was symptomatic of the direction his intellectual interests were taking and was to prove one of abiding interest to him for the rest of his life. Weckherlin, a Swabian from Stuttgart, had become the secretary of the English secretary of state responsible for the conduct of foreign affairs in 1626 and became a secretary of state himself in 1644, resigning when Charles I was executed, though persuaded to return in 1652 as

blind John Milton's assistant for the last months of his life. Here, then, was a poet, diplomat, and civil servant who, three centuries before, had successfully bridged the gulf between the two nations—Germany and England—and who had done so in a time of troubles while the Thirty Years War was raging on the Continent of Europe and the Civil War was being waged in Britain. Moreover, Weckherlin was also a linguist and translator, and a poet of some note whose polyglot verse fascinated young Forster, not least when in Latin, English, French, and his own German it lamented the demise of Elizabeth Trumbull, the lovely young sister of his future son-in-law, who had expired in Brussels in 1625 and was brought back to her native Dover for burial. Forster was to return to Weckherlin's diplomatic and literary activities, and to these poems in particular, throughout his life, beginning with *Georg Rudolf Weckherlin, zur Kenntnis seines Lebens in England*, published in Basle in the series *Basler Studien zur deutschen Sprache und Literatur*, 1944, and in effect the text of his doctoral dissertation, and, just after the war ended, 'Sources of Georg Rudolf Weckherlin's life in England: the correspondence', an article which appeared in the *Modern Language Review* in 1946. Some half-a-dozen further articles and papers on the Swabian poet were to follow, though sadly they have never been brought together in a single publication and their author never produced the full-scale biographical study of Weckherlin which might have brought him to the notice of a wider literary and historical readership in the English-speaking world. We must be glad that his analysis of the Elizabeth Trumbull cycle, originally published in the *Jahrbuch der deutschen Schillergesellschaft* in 1957, was reprinted twenty years later along with three other Weckherlin items in *Kleine Schriften zur deutschen Literatur im 17. Jahrhundert*, the collection of fifteen essays short and long which Leonard Forster was prevailed upon to gather together and publish in 1977 to the delight of his many younger admirers who did not have ready access on their own bookshelves to his work on German seventeenth-century literature.

In the meantime Leonard Forster, still in Basle and working on Weckherlin and much else besides, had met his wife-to-be, Jeanne Billeter, who survives him and who was to provide him with steadfast and loving support for the next sixty years: they married in 1939. He learnt her language: no mean feat, for the spoken German of the old city on the Rhine, especially in its patrician variety, requires a fine ear for rhythm, cadence, and register. This, however, was a gift he enjoyed in abundance; indeed his fine ear for the prosody of poetry, its metrical

framework, and for the wider implications of word choice and word placing was to make him one of the most sensitive readers of German lyric verse from the Middle Ages to the late twentieth century in British academic circles. It also enabled him to expand his range. His linguistic and metrical sensitivity increased his affection for Johann Peter Hebel, the Alemannic poet whose poetry was admired by Goethe and transcended political frontiers by finding a common readership in south-west Germany, Basle, and Alsace, and allowed him to range easily from Weckherlin and his more famous contemporary, Martin Opitz, to Paul Celan, two of whose holocaust-haunted poems (and 'Todesfuge' and 'Espanbaum') he analysed in 1969 and 1970. These, like much else, he was 'able to describe in a world-wide perspective that had been closed to those less gifted than he in the appreciation of the nuances of an astonishing number of languages', as the editors said in the preface of the special number which the periodical *German Life and Letters* dedicated to him ten years later in 1980. This was hardly surprising, for this was when Cambridge University Press was publishing two of his most ambitious books. *The Icy Fire* (1969), subtitled 'Studies in European Petrarchism', is generally regarded as his most important achievement in the field of European Renaissance verse (it was published in German as *Das eiskalte Feuer* in 1976), and *The Poet's Tongues* (1970), a pioneering study of the phenomenon of multilingualism in literature.

In 1937 Leonard Forster came back to England. The University of Cambridge had appointed him to a Faculty assistant lectureship in German, and Selwyn College had elected him simultaneously to a fellowship. But the university career so auspiciously inaugurated in 1937 was soon interrupted. World events impinged on the young lecturer, fellow and family man. The war broke out, and there was now more pressing work for him to do. The impact of his experiences during these years was to leave its traces in a number of his finest articles and essays, for it enabled him to enter into the experience of others and to comprehend the anxieties and tension hidden between the lines of literary works written in distant eras by people who had similarly been compelled to cope with the unforeseen contingencies and to adjust themselves as best they could to the vicissitudes of war, exile, and bereavement. Of all these essays and articles perhaps the finest is 'Henricus Lisbona and Martin Opitz', which appeared in 1978 in *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen*, 25, 21–32). This study—remarkable for its combination of brevity and breadth—shed

new light on *Zlatna*, a poem which Opitz wrote at the age of twenty-five during his year-long sojourn in Transylvania in 1622, by revealing the very real situation which had prompted its composition. Opitz's Dacian eclogue was no mere exercise in the pastoral mode. Its subtitle, 'Von Ruhe des Gemüths', provides the essential clue: *Zlatna*, the gold-mining estate on which the young German found temporary peace of mind, was managed by a man who was himself in all probability the son of a converted Jew who had lost everything and been driven into exile when Antwerp was subjected to the Duke of Alba's 'Spanish fury' in 1567, at the start of the Eighty Years War between Spain and the Netherlands. The immediate context of its composition links this ostensibly autobiographical poem with a wider experience while juxtaposing a vision of pastoral serenity with echoes of suffering and loss, yet Forster's article, written in collaboration with two Transylvanian German scholars, leaves its reader to draw such deductions, by confining itself to the description of supporting documentary evidence. Coming to Opitz's poem, as he did, with the cosmopolitan experience of a twentieth-century scholar, he was able to penetrate the façade of its orderly alexandrines and discover the core of a work written by a man whose most ambitious undertaking was a 'poem of consolation in the adversity of war'—the Thirty Years War in Germany which crops up so often in Leonard Forster's writings.

During the Second World War he found himself, like many another high-flying young academic, at Bletchley Park. Transformed into a naval officer and, from 1941, attached to the Foreign Office like the subject of his Basle doctoral thesis, he was employed in breaking German codes and carrying out other types of intelligence work, and ended the war as a Lieutenant-Commander RNVR (Sp.). He never spoke about his war, or, at least, never outside a close circle. One can therefore only speculate about its long-term influence on him. It may, however, be surmised that the experience sensitised him to the relationship between public persona and private individual, and to the contrast between the candid acts of free human beings in safe surroundings and the subterfuges and secrecies forced upon human beings in darker days. His awareness and a rapidly deepening understanding of the complex contradictions of the human psychology under pressure, as well as his first-hand knowledge of life and manners in Switzerland in and around the war years, made him an ideal editor of the detective novels written by the Swiss author Friedrich Dürrenmatt some ten years earlier. His edition of *Der Richter und sein Henker* was published by Harrap in

1962: *Der Verdacht* followed in 1965 and *Das Versprechen* in 1967. Soon these masterly analyses of the nature of criminality and the workings of guilt, the mechanisms of justice and the motives of retribution, were familiar set texts for countless British sixth-formers and undergraduates. What is particularly interesting is that in the same year as Harrap published Forster's edition of *Der Verdacht* ('with an introduction, notes and a skeleton vocabulary'), Metzler, the Stuttgart academic publishers, brought out his facsimile reprint of *Von der Beständigkeit*, the 1601 edition of the German translation of *De constantia*, the classic text of Renaissance neo-stoicism by the Belgian philosopher and humanist Justus Lipsius. This made available one of the key works for an understanding of the mentality of so many German writers of the first half of the seventeenth century, such as Andreas Gryphius, Paul Fleming, and Opitz himself.

This mentality and its analysis had already been the focus of what may be regarded as the most influential of the many thought-provoking public lectures he gave during his long postwar career. His return to Cambridge in 1946 was short-lived. For five years he taught widely, researched unremittingly and published some twelve articles of varying lengths in an ever widening field. Then, in 1950, he was appointed to the Chair of German at University College London. The inaugural lecture he gave as London's newest Professor of German was to be a major statement of his cultural interests and aims. Entitled 'The Temper of Seventeenth-century German Literature', it offered a broad and elegantly illustrated survey of Germany's literature in the larger context of seventeenth-century literature in Europe, and culminated with a statement of his belief that all views are at best no more than provisional, as are all attempts to summarise historical processes and explain them. A quarter of a century later, this inaugural lecture, which exerted such a quickening impact on young British scholars at the time, was to be given a welcome new lease of life when it appeared in a German translation by Hermann Boeschstein which was published together with reprints of fourteen other essays, articles and papers in a volume which its author entitled *Kleine Schriften zur deutschen Literatur im 17. Jahrhundert*, and which he dedicated, typically enough, to his three alma maters: Cambridge, Basle, and London. It was published in 1977 by Rodopi of Amsterdam. It must be a matter for regret that no comparable compilation of Leonard Forster's papers and lectures has been published in English or in Britain.

Leonard Forster spent eleven academic years in London as

Professor of German at University College. It was a period of far-ranging activity in which teaching and of course administration played dominant parts. The publications during this important phase in his career exhibit growing involvement with university teaching. This is exemplified, for instance, in two short pieces both published in 1985: 'School to University' (*Modern Languages*, 36, 51–5), compact and useful, and 'Zum Studium der Medizin in Basel: die Stimme eines Studenten aus dem Jahre 1668' (*Gesnerus*, 12, 37–43), equally concise, but this time tuning in to a medical student's voice from almost three centuries earlier, but that of a student for all that. This exemplifies a trait that was typical of Forster's intellect: it was precisely his acute awareness of the parallels between past and present that enabled him to perceive and define the distinctions between them so precisely and to appreciate the continuities between them so appreciatively. He was never a man to describe heterogeneous phenomena as 'all much the same': their apparent similarities challenged him to spot the differences, sometimes minute and barely visible to the speed-reading eye, and not only when the objects under scrutiny were various editions or versions of one and the same text, or manuscripts in various hands. He loved dealing with what Germans aptly term *Lesearten*, and could see in them wonders of diversity, rather as a botanist might see plants which to the uninitiated seem identical. Nor should we in the present climate forget that he was a staunch champion of the notion of freedom both in research and in teaching: quality controls such as characterise university study today, and the 'dumbing down' taking place throughout higher education, are trends he would have scorned in his unremitting pursuit of quality. He was a self-confessed traditionalist fascinated by the Renaissance and who was forever opening up new ground. In the Presidential Address of the Modern Humanities Research Association which he gave in January 1978, he reminded his audience that 'the work of art is inimical to ideologies' and that 'the scholar has to remain rigorous in his standards but his comprehension must be flexible and renewed from day to day'. Throughout his life as a teacher and author he shared the view that it is the task of the literary scholar to understand and help others to understand.¹

¹ 'Literary Studies as a Flight from Literature', *Modern Language Review*, 73, xxii–xxxiv. See also 'Persönliches Bekenntnis'. This is the German version made by Forster himself of a talk he gave on the BBC Third Programme in December 1956 for inclusion in *Wie, warum und zu welchem Ende wurde ich Literaturhistoriker?*, edited by Robert Minder (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1972), pp. 79–84.

Leonard Forster's linguistic versatility was becoming ever more apparent in his growing list of publications, which by 1957 (that is, twenty years after his first academic appointment) had grown to a total of fifty-seven, though it is doubtful that he ever subscribed to the ill-conceived philosophy of 'publish or perish'. His early publications had been in German, English, and Dutch, a language to which he felt particularly drawn, both in its seventeenth-century and its modern forms, and in which he achieved rare proficiency. Indeed his output as an expert on the byways rather than the greatest achievements of Dutch literature in the 'Gouden Eeuw' constitute a body of estimable work in themselves, including detailed studies of the poetry of Jan van de Noot and the emergence of early Dutch renaissance prosody. In 1954 he added French ('Traductions françaises d'œuvres de dévotions puritaines', in the *Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire du Protestantisme français*, 100, 147–54). Although he never published an article in Latin, his abiding fondness for the language of humanism, that Esperanto of a scholarly age, was often in evidence, too, as in 'An unnoticed Latin poem by Thomas Randolph, 1633' in *Eos*, edited by A. T. Hatto (The Hague: Mouton, 1965, pp. 282–98), not to mention his invaluable *Selections from Conrad Celtis, 1459–1508*, published by Cambridge University Press in 1948. His love of Latin and of macaronic verse went hand in hand with a lifelong delight in nonsense which accounts for the essay he contributed on the famous German nonsense poet Christian Morgenstern to the second volume in the 'German Men of Letters' series edited by Alex Natan and published by Oswald Wolff in 1963.

He was never deaf or blind to the art and literature of the world he himself inhabited. As early as 1953 he had edited a volume of *German Tales for our Time* for Harraps, while in Cambridge Bowes & Bowes had in quick succession published two editions of his *German Poetry, 1944–1948* in 1949 and 1950. This was followed by what was to be the most successful of all his publications: *The Penguin Book of German Verse*, which first appeared in 1957, has remained in the catalogue of books in print ever since. In 1950 another facet of his wide-ranging urge to draw connections became evident in 'Goethe und das heutige England', an article published in *Euphorion*, 45, pp. 35–49. He was to return to Goethe later, in 1981, when he chose as his topic for a Bithell memorial lecture 'The man who wanted to know everything', and gave us an erudite analysis of Goethe's most famous character, Faust. By then his stature as one of Britain's leading and most knowledgeable Germanists had been confirmed when, in 1961, he accepted the Schröder Chair

of German at the University of Cambridge. There he was to remain for the rest of his life, happily surrounded by his growing collection of vellum and leather-bound tomes in his attractive and characterful house, 51 and later 49 Maids' Causeway, where he would make his numerous visitors welcome and entertain them with conversation both jovial and mercurial punctuated by libations of white wine, accompanied by olives and perhaps his favourite chocolate 'fruits de mer'. It was an oasis of informal yet regulated calm. Perhaps some of his many visitors never realised that the tomes which lined his shelves were no mere window-dressing: they were the primary objects of his scrutiny, many of them directly connected with his publications, and constituting what in German is so aptly termed a '*Handbibliothek*'. No internet website can recreate the smell, feel and look of the real thing and thereby suspend time itself in the act of reading. Though a dogged pursuer of bibliographical and biographical minutiae, as witness his *Iter Bohemicum*, a scholarly amble through the German baroque treasures to be found in scarcely known Bohemian private libraries (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1980), contemporary-style computer-generated research would never have satisfied him.

By the time of his retirement from the Schröder Chair at Cambridge in 1979, his stature as one of Britain's leading Germanists was being increasingly confirmed on the international scene. In 1970 to 1975 his able presidency of the IVG (International Association of Germanists) had culminated in the 1975 International Conference which brought Germanists from all over the world to Cambridge in memorably glorious summer weather. Ever one to surprise and be amused by the astonishment of others, the British President of the IVG served white wine from an English vineyard on the lawns of his College, Selwyn, to the appreciative incredulity of his largely German, Austrian, and Swiss guests and to the delight and admiration of his young British colleagues. It was a princely way of emphasising harmony where discord might have reigned, for the world of German studies was rife with opposing views as to their proper purposes and how best to achieve them. In 1976 he was elected to a Fellowship of the British Academy and was awarded the Großes Verdienstkreuz of the Federal Republic of Germany. It was one of the first of a series of honours which included honorary doctorates from Leiden (1975), Bath (1979), Strasbourg (1980), and Heidelberg (1986), and prizes such as the Gold Medal of the Goethe Institute in Munich (1966), the Friedrich Gundolf-Preis für Germanistik im Ausland (1981) and the Comenius Medal awarded to

him by the Czech Republic in 1992. Prior to these awards and distinctions he had made a name for himself as a member or corresponding member of Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung (1957), the Royal Belgian Academy of Dutch Language and Literature (1973), and the Society for Dutch Literary Studies in Leiden (1966), and as a visiting professor in Toronto (1957), Montreal (1967–8), Heidelberg (1964 and 1980), Otago (1968), Utrecht (1976), Kiel (1967–8) and Basel (1985–6). He was admitted to the Royal Netherlands Academy of Sciences and Letters in 1968 in recognition of the publication in 1967 of two important contributions to Dutch Studies, the first characteristically related to England, the second to Germany: *Janus Gruter's English Years: Studies in the Continuity of Dutch Literature in Exile in Elizabethan England* (Leiden: University Press and Oxford: University Press, 1967) and *Die Niederlande und die Anfänge der Barocklyrik in Deutschland* (Groningen: Wolters, 1967). His stature as a connoisseur of rare books was acknowledged in 1975 when he became a Senior Consultant at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington and in 1976–83, when he enjoyed a similar function at the Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel, a seat of learning which for some years became a kind of home from home for him, and where he held court in the spirit of past dukes such as the august founder of the great library. When he and his wife finally decided to leave their house in Maids' Causeway and move to a more convenient flat close to Selwyn College, he generously gave his own collection of old and unusual books to the rare books collection of Bristol University Library.

To sum up the achievement of a man such as Leonard Forster and evaluate his contribution to his subject and the wider cultural awareness of his age is not easy. There can be no doubt that he was a scholar whose range of interests was unusually wide and always genuine. He could move with ease from the poems of the unjustly neglected Romantic writer Wilhelm Müller, who translated Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and composed the poems which Schubert set to music in song-cycles *Die schöne Müllerin* and *Die Winterreise*, to Goethe's *Faust* itself, about which he wrote two important essays in 1971, one in English on 'Faust and the sin of sloth' for *The Discontinuous Tradition* (edited by Peter Ganz and published by the Clarendon Press, Oxford), the other, 'Faust und die *acedia*: Mephisto und die *superbia*', in *Dichtung, Sprache, Gesellschaft*, the edited papers of the Fourth International Congress of Germanists held in Princeton in 1970 and published in Frankfurt/M by Athenäum. He was a perceptive writer on translation, and here again

Goethe was at the centre of discussion: 'Translations of Goethe's *Faust*: verse or prose?' was the title of his valuable contribution to the special translation number of *German Life and Letters* in July 1990. It is a periodical which he edited for many years, and which honoured him with a special number in October 1980 on his retirement from the Cambridge Chair at the end of the previous academic year, well ahead of the *Festschrift* in his honour, *From Wolfram and Petrarch to Goethe and Grass*, published by Koerner in Baden-Baden in 1982, which contains a bibliography of Forster's publications between 1936 and 1980, compiled by Peter Fox. He was a man of multiple connections and friendships: for example he knew Günter Grass, with whom he shared many an interest, not least in the Thirty Years War and the survival of literary and cultural values which Grass depicted in quasi-historical form in *Das Treffen in Telgte*, a highly allusive and complex work very much after Forster's own heart. But of all his miscellaneous publications the one that brings us closest to the man who left us on 18 April 1997 is surely his exquisite and profound essay 'Meditation in a garden' (*German Life and Letters*, 31, 23–35), in which he concerned himself with the renaissance and baroque conception of the garden as a place of spiritual reflection, and which he ended with the characteristically no-nonsense words 'Sometimes it's as simple as that!'

PETER SKRINE

University of Bristol