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J. P. STERN

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Joseph Peter Maria Stern 1920–1991

I

JOSEPH PETER MARIA STERN was born in Prague on Christmas Day 1920 into a Czech-speaking family of Jewish descent and Roman Catholic beliefs. He attended schools in Prague and Vienna before leaving his homeland in the summer of 1939 in search of the opportunity to fight against Hitler which his country's capitulation had denied him. After an unsuccessful attempt to join a Polish army unit, he found his way to Britain, a country whose language he hardly knew, but whose quaint refraction in Czech translations of public-school yarns had caught his imagination as a boy. A scholarship fund for refugees organised by a Welsh clergyman allowed him to complete his schooling at Barry Grammar School in Glamorgan, after which he was admitted to St. John's College, Cambridge to read Modern Languages. His studies were interspersed with service in the RAF, where he took part as a rear gunner in bombing raids over Europe. He had a close escape when his aircraft ditched in the Channel, wounding him badly and depriving him of three fingers on one hand. After completing his BA, characteristically choosing an unprecedented combination of Sanskrit and Old Church Slavonic to accompany German literature in his Tripos options, he wavered between philosophy and literature as a postgraduate specialism before settling on the eighteenth-century polymath, G. C. Lichtenberg as the subject of his doctoral thesis, which he completed in 1949. A first post of Assistant Lecturer in German at Bedford

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College London from 1950 to 1952 was followed by twenty years in university lecturing appointments at Cambridge, combined from 1954 onwards with a Fellowship at St. John's College. In 1972 he was appointed Professor of German at University College London, a post he occupied until his retirement in 1986. Before and after retirement, he held a variety of visiting professorships in the USA, Austria and Germany. In addition to countless articles and reviews, he published books which made him one of the most widely-known and influential scholars in modern German studies: *Ernst Jünger: a Writer of our Time* (1952); *G. C. Lichtenberg: a Doctrine of Scattered Occasions* (1959); *Re-interpretations* (1964, reissued 1981); *Idylls and Realities* (1971); *On Realism* (1973, revised German edition 1982); *Hitler: the Führer and the People* (1975, revised edition 1990, German, Czech and French editions 1978, 1985 and 1987 respectively); *A Study of Nietzsche* (1979, revised German edition 1988); and, in collaboration with Michael Silk, *Nietzsche on Tragedy* (1981). There are two posthumously published volumes: *The Heart of Europe* (1992) a collection of essays and reviews spanning some twenty years, many of them revised and reworked by the author in the year before his death, which is perhaps the best place for anyone seeking an insight into the range and depth of Stern's writings to make a start; and *The Dear Purchase* (1994) a major study of Rilke, Kafka, Thomas Mann and Brecht, which had occupied him for decades and from which many of his earlier publications had been offshoots. He was founder-editor of the Cambridge University Press series of monographs *Landmarks of World Literature* which gained international respect thanks to his sometimes surprising but invariably shrewd choice of authors and his clear editorial vision.

Among many other honours, he was awarded the degree of Litt. D. in 1975, and the Goethe Medal for distinguished services to German culture in 1980, and in 1990 he was elected Fellow of the British Academy and Honorary Fellow of St. John's College, Cambridge. He died of cancer in Cambridge in November 1991, surrounded by family, friends and page proofs, not long before his seventy-first birthday.

II

Stern acknowledged three primary intellectual influences. The first was Michael Oakeshott, who supervised his doctoral dissertation. Though he did not find the Hegelian elements in Oakeshott's thinking con-

genial, Stern was lastingly impressed by his interpretation of Hobbes, which shaped his own lifelong convictions about the rule of law as a remedy against the tyranny of natural differences and grounded his views on the crucial significance of the sphere of human association in civil society, that 'mode' of human experience, in Oakeshott's terminology, which Stern's analyses showed was noticeably undervalued in German literature and ideas in the modern era, accounting for some of the profundities and many of the aberrations of that culture. Ludwig Wittgenstein, a friend of whom Stern has written with moving insight and sympathy, furnished him with the closest he ever came to a critical 'methodology' in his solution of the problem of universals via the notion of 'family resemblances', networks of overlapping but not necessarily common features which allow general terms to identify conceptual coherences while respecting individual differences among the entities they subsume. Finally, Erich Auerbach's book *Mimesis: the Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, first published in German in 1949, offered him a model of literary criticism which was authoritative but never dogmatic, broad in conceptual scope while minutely attentive to detail, acutely sensitive to historical and cultural differences while cultivating the vision of an overarching Western tradition. Stern once remarked, only half-jokingly, that he was grateful Auerbach thought so little of German literature that he left most of it out of account, otherwise there would have not been much left for him to do . . .

Stern himself identified his chief critical interest as an exploration of the ways that German literature mingles the metaphysical and the parochial, the provincial and the universal, which subsequently led him into an investigation of what he termed the 'Dear Purchase' — the idea, formulated most powerfully by Nietzsche, that human beings require a secular salvation which must be bought at the highest conceivable existential price, a notion which Stern showed was central to the finest works of German literature in the first half of the twentieth century. I think, however, that both these enquiries, along with his study of Hitler and the sources of his appeal to the German people, are aspects of a more fundamental concern which furnished the power and the coherence of Stern's analytical imagination, his critical methods and his personal life: his belief in the irreducible if often elusive and infinitesimal reality of human moral freedom and his interest in tracking down and showing forth that freedom in the interstices of psychology, ideology, tradition, habit, and history. That belief

suggests why he chose literary criticism rather than philosophy for his life's work, and it indicates some of the reasons for his choice of methods and objects of enquiry.

Because freedom as he sought and valued it is always inseparable from its concrete and individual circumstances (only an individual can be free in the strictly moral sense), it can never adequately be encompassed by abstractions or generalities. Yet no mere accumulation of concrete instances can constitute an argument or a demonstration. Here is where literature, and critical discourse about literature, allowed Stern to speak of things about which as a philosopher he might have felt compelled to stay silent. Literature, especially realistic writing of the kind Stern described in his masterly *On Realism*, with its ability to offer images of human experience which we are invited to recognise as at one and the same time individual and representative, can constitute a deeply serious Wittgensteinian 'language game', a 'form of life' within which freedom in all its variety but also in its essential identity as the source of human dignity can be traced and scrutinised.

Hence, I believe, Stern's fascination with works of literature which either carefully adopt or studiously (and therefore revealingly) avoid that 'middle distance' from their human subject-matter which includes enough of both the private and the public, the individual and the social, to bring moral freedom into focus. Hence, too, his lifelong interest, alongside his strictly literary subjects, in thinkers like Lichtenberg and Nietzsche, and perhaps also the later Wittgenstein, who yearned to be hedgehogs but were compelled by their own critical integrity to be foxes, who glimpsed one big thing, a 'doctrine', but could not truthfully articulate it other than through a multitude of small things, of 'scattered occasions', to borrow from the subtitle of Stern's Lichtenberg study. From the same roots stem his pursuit of the reasons why the vast majority of the German population gave Hitler their eager allegiance: his examination of all the ideological, linguistic, religious, social, economic and historical determinants which disposed Hitler to make his monstrous claims and influenced so many people to accept them with enthusiastic devotion is undertaken to reveal the vestiges of free choice which allow neither the leader nor the led to be absolved of moral responsibility. Hence, finally, his espousal of a procedure inspired by Auerbach, which he enjoined on all his students (and also on the authors in his *Landmarks of World Literature* series): the 'fully exploited' quotation, by which he meant a scrutiny of cited text designed to bring out the pattern of choices that, from the universe of

linguistic possibilities open to the author, had produced the lexis and syntax on the actual page. 'Le style, c'est l'homme même' acquired in Stern's practice of stylistic analysis a new dimension of meaning: lexical and syntactic decisions, the individual choice of *parole* within the enabling constraints of *langue*, located human freedom in the very warp and weft of the literary fabric.

III

Stern was prepared by a spell at Berkeley in 1967 for the student unrest which visited Cambridge in the following year. Though the Modern Linguists he taught showed little interest in revolt, the college policy of assigning undergraduates a personal tutor from outside their academic discipline gave him pastoral responsibility for Social Sciences students, including some who found themselves at odds with the law as well as with the university authorities. The patience and fair-mindedness with which he fulfilled a tutor's duty to act as his students' advocate whatever his personal views of their case, sustained in some instances in the face of obstruction and abuse from precisely the young people whose interests he was representing, constitute one of his most admirable and least recognised professional achievements.

He was unsympathetic towards the trend, ever more evident in schools and universities since the early 1970s, towards German courses excluding literary study. He insisted that, despite all claims on behalf of 'German for Special Purposes', there was at bottom only one German language, and that engagement with great literature was the best way of mastering it. This unfashionable stance rested on his conviction that literature was the domain where choices about language were most consciously and skilfully made, so that to appreciate the language of literature was to assimilate the widest possible repertoire of linguistic possibilities while simultaneously being enriched through exposure to another culture. But he was far from being an unthinking traditionalist as far as the curriculum was concerned. His lectures and supervisions in the early fifties at Cambridge helped establish the position of twentieth-century German literature in the Tripos, where it had been rather grudgingly admitted as a limited-term Special Subject not long before he took up his Cambridge post. At University College London, he led the Department into a replacement of the Federal Syllabus, which was rather outdated and inflexible in its content and approach, by a college-

based degree subsequently much imitated elsewhere, that allowed UCL to attract strong applicants for German despite the handicap of being unable to offer combined degrees with French; and he saw to it that the Department obtained a new blood appointment in German History which gave an important new dimension to its teaching and research.

His lecture courses were very far from the pre-digested diet which staff development experts nowadays try to 'train' lecturers to provide. He expected his listeners to share in his interpretative efforts, and unapologetic allusiveness was one of his main devices. The closest he ever came to the currently-approved technique of 'signposting' stages in an argument was his habit of preceding the first statement of a cardinal point with an extra loud jingle of the coins in his pocket, accompanied by the phrase 'to put the matter briefly but obscurely . . .' completed by some gnomic formulation upon which he would then elaborate. But though he was determined not to spoonfeed, he was never wilfully abstruse. He constantly scanned the faces of his audience, and when he spotted puzzlement he would reformulate a point until he was satisfied it had been conveyed. His lectures at London were often judged to be more widely comprehensible than those he gave at Cambridge, probably because Cambridge students, superficially more sophisticated, are more prone to hide bewilderment than their London counterparts, so that he sometimes overestimated their capacity to keep up with him.

In individual supervision of undergraduates and research students his approach was even more at odds with pedagogical doctrines which put the preservation of 'confidence' before the fostering of achievement. Just as he tried to find a uniquely appropriate approach to every literary text, so too he formed a view of the individual potential of each of his students, bearing in mind their personalities, backgrounds and interests, and he expected them to live up to his estimation. It was disconcerting to be told, as I suspect all of his pupils were on one occasion or another, that a particular argument was 'not worthy' of them; and some found it, to his sorrow, disheartening or even offensive. But those who took his criticisms in the spirit they were intended found themselves guided towards insights and achievements they could not have reached without his prompting. He was never sarcastic or belittling, and he always relished well-founded challenges to his ideas or judgements. Part of his respect for the individuality of his students was his refusal to accept intellectual disciples: on at least one occasion he regretfully but firmly refused to continue supervising a research

student who seemed set on simply applying Stern's methods and convictions to new materials.

IV

In 1944 Stern married Sheila McMullan, a fellow modern linguist. With their four children and a succession of large and much-loved dogs, she helped him make the house they had built in Newnham with its lakeside garden into a place of hospitality like none other in Cambridge or elsewhere. Peter Stern, with his unflagging good humour and his unforced interest in all sorts of people and their views, was inevitably the enlivening spirit of the countless gatherings, organised and impromptu, that took place there over the years, but he never held court. Skilfully abetted by Sheila, he would get the most unlikely combinations of people talking, then move genially among them, a bottle in each hand, his cue for passing on to the next group generally being the sight of a guest's empty glass or the need to wipe a grandchild's nose with one of his enormous coloured handkerchiefs.

He played a ferocious game of table tennis and a cool-headed hand of poker, and was disquietingly fond of powerful cars and fast driving. The remorseless decline in the value of academic salaries may have prolonged his life, for it meant that in his later years he could no longer afford vehicles which, in his phrase, could 'go up hills without one actually *noticing*.' Though he loved to ride to hounds, he had too much self-irony to become 'a foxhunting man'. When a piece he wrote for a local paper enthusing about the huntsman's closeness to rural life found its way into Pseuds' Corner in *Private Eye*, this backhanded recognition by yet another British institution gave him quite as much delight as any of the international honours he received.

A lifelong fierce patriot of the First Czechoslovak Republic, Stern was anything but a nationalist. On the contrary, he saw the First Republic, with its political ambition to bind diverse and often hostile national and racial groups to a single democratic constitution, as a far more promising model for peace and prosperity in central Europe than any of the nation-states created by the Versailles Treaty. He was convinced that his country, its modern army better equipped and trained than any other in Europe, had been wrong to accept dismemberment without a fight after its betrayal by France and Britain at Munich, and he was equally critical of the expulsion of the Sudeten

Germans in 1945 as a posthumous violation of the First Republic's ideals. History, which had kept him in exile all his adult life, showed him some belated kindness by giving him back his native land in his last years, allowing him to return there and lecture on the subjects he loved in the language dearest to his heart; and in his friends' eyes it was a piece of sombre good fortune that the secession of Slovakia, the final defeat of the First Republic's political aspirations, came only after his death.

His spoken English, though perfectly fluent and idiomatically faultless, was nevertheless unmistakably foreign, partly in its intonation, partly through his habit of speaking at least one word in every sentence as it were in italics, perhaps an attempt to make up for the lack of nuancing particles characteristic of Austrian speech. The sense of being an exile in a strange land never wholly left him, though he transformed what a melancholic disposition might have felt as alienation into a source of unending interest, indeed delight, adding new English idioms or idiosyncrasies to his collection with an almost childlike glee. When he spoke of his wartime rescue from the sea it was easy to gain the impression that the most important aspect of the experience was his discovery of how to pronounce the name of Mousehole, the Cornish village where he was brought to shore. One of his favourite literary passages was the hilarious episode in Thomas Mann's *Felix Krull*, written in wartime California, where the eponymous confidence-trickster, masquerading as a nobleman, has to play a game of tennis even though he has never so much as held a racket in his entire previous life. 'Only an exile could have written that,' was Stern's revealing commentary. His love of England was proved by his remaining resident here despite lucrative and prestigious offers from across the Atlantic, though in his later years, like some other distinguished European intellectuals who had chosen Britain as their home, he was saddened by what seemed to him the wanton assaults of the Thatcher administration on many of the things he most prized in the British way of life, not least on the liberal traditions of our universities.

In his public appearances he could appear the embodiment of Central European *gravitas*, and in polemical exchanges with opponents well able to defend themselves he would drive home his points with withering irony; but in day-to-day dealings with colleagues and students and in private life he was always charming, tolerant, prone to outbursts of impish high spirits, a patient listener, endlessly kind, inexhaustibly generous, entirely free from any trace of meanness or malice.

He was not, in any ordinary sense of the word, a 'religious' man, yet his thinking and actions had an inspiration more profound than any of the intellectual authorities I listed earlier, never explicitly avowed but often alluded to for those who had ears to bear: the Jesus of the Gospels, the angry cleanser of the Temple as well as the eirenic deliverer of the Sermon on the Mount. Lichtenberg once suggested that the meaning of the phrase 'divine service' should be 'transposed' so that it had nothing to do with churchgoing and referred only to good actions. If ever anyone lived out such a transposition, unemphatically and yet with consistent courage and dedication, it was Peter Stern.

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