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Early reviewers of Anmerkungen übers Theater who were taken aback by its associative organization and rhetoric of fits and starts could not have been surprised when, less than three years after it appeared, its author began drifting into mental illness. Today, of course, it is on every German MA reading list, and Lenz is hailed as a precursor of Grabbe, Büchner, Wedekind, and Brecht. Some see him, moreover, as a writer who sensed the winds of modernity like few others of his generation. Finally the essay is available in English, appearing as the first volume in a new series that is set to offer parallel editions of previously untranslated German texts. The 1774 Weygand edition appears on the recto pages together with the 66 footnotes that Hans-Günther Schwarz provided for the Reclam edition in 1976, and on the verso side is Norman R. Diffey and Schwarz’s English translation of the text and notes. An additional 73 notes, written especially for this edition, are provided at the end. The book begins with a concise introduction by Diffey and concludes with a provocative afterword by Schwarz, followed by a list of suggested readings. The translators do a fine job of conveying Lenz’s impromptu-sounding style and the playful tone he adopts with his imagined audience. A few sentences are slightly expanded so that the English is as clear as the German, and there are some changes in the punctuation, but very little is altered, and the quirkiness of the original comes right through.

All this adds up to a short course on Lenz’s best-known essay, and its author in general, and the volume should be useful to a wide range of teachers and scholars, not just those working in Lenz and Sturm und Drang, but across the humanities. Perhaps most important, it will give non-readers of German a clearer understanding of the origins of modern epic theater. Lenz, who had read Mercier and Beaumarchais, realized that neoclassical theater could not illustrate real life and depict people in their full glory, as free and independent beings. But in Shakespeare (his translation of Love’s Labour’s Lost was published along with Anmerkungen übers Theater) he saw a path to a new kind of tragedy, the kind he thought his age deserved – one that ignored the Aristotelian unities and instead simply found its own adequate form; that subordinated plot to character; and that eschewed myth and ideals in favor of heightened attention to concrete life. If tragedy is to contain a truly compelling depiction of humanity, Lenz argues, then the plot must be «a series of actions which follow one another like bolts of lightning, support and lift each
other, and must flow together into one whole which eventually reveals no more, no less than the main character.» Taking this approach, he asserts, we should be able to write realistic plays in which «the hero is the key to his own fortunes» and not locked into a fate cast beforehand in heaven. The latter may have satisfied the ancients, he says, but now it’s time for us to see people determining their own lives, and this requires paying closer attention to the world. The playwright he envisions «takes his standpoint – and from there connects as he must» – a technique that requires not just workmanlike reproduction, but a new kind of mimesis, an active, intelligent penetration to the core of one’s subject. In this age when we no longer need to pay homage to the gods, artists should dare to act like gods themselves and strive to uncover the kinds of facts and connections that divine beings might see if they conducted an honest review of our situation here on earth. Lenz’s own plays («comedies,» not the character-driven tragedies he envisions in this essay) provide at least a partial answer to this call for a new theater: they reject tight architectonic structure in favor of a montage of scenes, of whatever number and length needed to tell the story. Of course, he never wrote a play that answered his own call for a hero who turned the whole machine of the play, but he did at least demonstrate how open form and close attention to one’s surroundings can create another kind of stage – one where we don’t see heroism, ideals, and traditional beauty, but virtually the opposite: passive characters crushed by sick societies and – often comically – by their own contradictions and poor choices. We might not be able to identify with these people, but as we now know because of writers like Lenz, a detached audience can often see things more clearly. What Lenz depicts is misery, and though he doesn’t lay the blame on one particular class, his anti-neoclassical approach helps us see things that were once easily overlooked.

One of the best things about this book is that it shows Lenz to be not just a groundbreaking theorist of drama, but also a humanist warring against the regimented culture of his day. No other writer associated with Sturm und Drang painted such vivid pictures of stifled aspirations and suffocating determinism. In other work as well, like his review of Goethe’s Götz von Berlichingen, he saw that already when we are young, social forces can join with our biological urges to make us satisfied living like a cog in a machine, rotating, as he says, in place like all the other cogs. Likewise, in Anmerkungen übers Theater, where he famously admonishes, «Or are you afraid, gentlemen, of seeing a human being?» it is a question not just about the new kind of hero he wants to see on the stage, but about the human condition in general. As Schwarz and Diffey point out, Lenz felt that the spoken and unspoken rules of his culture were killing the human spirit, and they suggest that this essay is not just a manifesto for a new theater, but «a manifesto for a new kind of humanity» – and a text that points forward not just to Schiller but also to Nietzsche. «Overarching his theory as well as his writings, not only in theatre but also in the other genres,» Schwarz writes, «is a revolutionary concept of man as a ‹free-acting independent creature› – a concept which, interestingly enough, has yet to be realized» (93).

The editors show how this essay is relevant for a whole spectrum of modern concerns. To cite one example: they compare and contrast Lenz and Georg Lukács with
regard to their theories of literary realism. Both saw literature as an active, inquiring force that could lay bare connections and show how the world worked and how it might be improved, but while Lukács thought that the nineteenth-century novels he loved could offer a grand, objective look at an entire culture, Lenz’s aims are less ambitious and, arguably, more «concrete»: he merely asks writers to choose a particular standpoint and look deeply into what is observable from that one place. In providing their translation and commentary, Diffey and Schwarz give Lenz his due in several areas, including literary expressionism, genre theory, and broader questions of aesthetics (Patrizia C. McBride, for instance, has argued that in Lenz’s self-interrupting, self-undermining style there is an early acknowledgement of the futility of all rational discourse about art). Finally, since key texts by Lenz, Klinger, and Wagner (naturally also Goethe and Schiller) are already translated into English, the appearance of this edition means that nothing stands in the way of offering an English-language course on the Sturm und Drang. I am optimistic enough to believe that there are universities where that course would make. I do have one suggestion for future runs of this book (and other volumes planned for the series): they should be published with a longer list of recommended secondary literature, and should include not just more English language criticism, but also some of the best German-language material, since many potential users of an edition like this will likely know at least some German.

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There can be no doubt that biographer Volker Neuhaus, prominent Grass scholar and editor of the writer’s collected, annotated works, greatly esteems the Nobel laureate’s literary accomplishments as well as his endeavors in other fields when he explicitly – and not without justification – compares Grass to two eminent predecessors in the realm of German letters: «Seine frühen Erfolge und seine lange Lebensdauer lassen Grass jetzt die Jubiläen seiner frühen Welterfolge miterleben, wie einst Goethe 1825 fünfzig Jahre Werther und Thomas Mann 1951 im Exil fünfzig Jahre Buddenbrooks geeiert haben» (446). Indeed, Die Blechtrommel (1959), the first – and presumably the most famous as well as notorious – of these «Weltfolge» has withstood the test of time and has become an almost canonical work. But, as the title of the biography indicates, Neuhaus does not only analyze Grass’s literary work; in particular, he delves into the various phases of Grass’s private life, from his youth in Danzig to his current abode in the vicinity of Lübeck via Düsseldorf, (West) Berlin, Paris, and again (West) Berlin, to mention only some of the important venues of his activities. Neuhaus also devotes considerable attention to Grass the artist and to Grass the politically engaged «Zeitgenosse» who labored predominantly in support of Willy Brandt and the SPD. (The voluminous correspondence between Grass and Brandt was published in May 2013: Willy Brandt und