



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 5. Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War, 1890-1918
Julius Langbehn, *Rembrandt as Educator* (1890)

Julius Langbehn (1851-1907) earned a doctorate in art history and archaeology in 1880 but never managed to secure a university position – a situation no doubt attributable to his difficult personality, sloppy intellect, and poor academic preparation. In the 1880s, he led a mostly itinerant life characterized by odd jobs and frequent moves. In 1889, he attempted to take sole custody of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), who was suffering from severe mental illness. His plan to “cure” Nietzsche was yet another failure. Langbehn’s luck finally changed in 1890, when he published *Rembrandt as Educator* [*Rembrandt als Erzieher*], a tract lambasting modern life in all its myriad manifestations (e.g., rationalism, liberalism, materialism, and the rise of “mass culture”). The book praised the Dutch artist Rembrandt as the quintessence of the “southern German race.” For Langbehn, Rembrandt was both a spiritual father-figure and an “educator” whose shining example would ultimately lead to a national rebirth that placed art above politics, religion, and science. The book was an instant success, particularly in middle-class circles. It went through 39 editions almost immediately and took on increasingly anti-Semitic overtones. (Note: the excerpt below is taken from the 37th edition, published in 1891.) Langbehn’s overt nationalism was part of a larger trend in Germany – the country was suffering from a general malaise over the kind of polity it should become in the midst of so many conflicting interest groups and social formations.

Central ideas

Signs of decline

It has almost become an open secret that the spiritual life of the German *Volk* [people] today is in a state of slow – some would say rapid – decay. Science everywhere is splintering into specialization; epoch-making figures are missing in the fields of thought and literature; the visual arts, though represented by important masters, lack monumentality and thus their best effect; musicians are rare, performers many. Architecture is the axis of the fine arts, just as philosophy is the axis of all scientific thinking; at the moment, however, there is neither a German architecture nor a German philosophy. The great luminaries in the various fields are dying out; *les rois s’en vont* [the kings depart]. The contemporary artistic endeavor has, in its frantic pursuit of style, tried out all periods and peoples, and in spite of this – or precisely because of this – it has not achieved a style of its own. There is no question that the democratizing, leveling, atomizing spirit of the century is finding expression in all of this. Moreover, the education of the present is largely historical, Alexandrian, and backward-looking; it is concerned less with creating values than recording them. This, in fact, touches on the weak side of our contemporary education: it is scientific and wants to be scientific, but the more scientific it becomes, the less creative it will be. “They hold the parts in their hands; sadly they lack only the spiritual bands.” Goethe, who is venerated by Germans today more in theory than in practice,

could not stand people with glasses; but Germany is now full of real and spiritual wearers of glasses; when will it return in this regard to Goethe's point of view? Surely it is not fitting for the inhabitants of an empire like the German one to declare themselves epigones with a shrug and to renounce progress regarding the truly decisive question of spiritual life. No error is more calamitous than the belief that one has completed the main elements of one's education; the belief that one can merely patch them up here and there: as long as a *Volk* is alive, it cannot escape the necessity of great shifts in its mental axis, in its inner life. Today, discoveries are made in East Africa, but there are far more important discoveries to be made right here in Germany; it is not enough that the Germans have discovered themselves as citizens; they should also discover themselves as human beings!

A turn toward art

Indeed, a trend in that direction is already perceptible; the better among Germany's educated are looking for new goals in the realm of the intellect. Bismarck, however, said that "the people's opinion is difficult to discern." And in fact, the latter is often something very different from the so-called public opinion; but even a hidden stream betrays itself through vague murmurings. – As it does in this instance. Interest in science, and especially in the once so popular natural science, has recently been declining in broad circles of the German world; a noticeable turnaround in the relevant general mood is taking place; the time when a prominent member at the meeting of natural scientists in Kassel could, in all seriousness, declare it the "brain of Germany" is over. People no longer quite believe in this kind of Gospel. They are rather fed up with induction; there is a thirst for synthesis. We are now standing at the beginning of a new era. The reign, not of *Wissenschaft* [science and scholarship] as such, but of a type of *Wissenschaft* that believes itself to be omnipotent at times, is coming to an end. The education that is now predominantly given to Germans is only a transitional stage in their overall spiritual development. They are a nation of art and should therefore prove themselves as such both internally and externally; old Sebastian Frank, in his *World Chronicle*, already called them "so skilled and quick in all artistic endeavors that they are second to none." The vague premonition of such a development is already found in Goethe, indeed, in the music-loving Luther, if you will. Until the age of 40, the former, as we know, had the serious intention of devoting himself to the fine arts; and the main accomplishment of the latter, the translation of the Bible, was essentially an artistic achievement. The personality of Goethe, especially, is in this case characteristic of the German people today. To be sure, the spiritual structure of the latter is at this time still a scientific one, but it will not be so forever; rather, it would seem that an age of art is now at hand. Small but unmistakable signs confirm this. Just as one can tell the direction of the wind from the position of a blade of grass, the change in the mental climate that is taking place in Germany today is also manifested in the fact that the "professor," as a type, is disappearing from the stage and novels of everyday life to make room for the "artist." Triviality, too, has its laws, and – harmoniously enough – they parallel those of genius. In this case they both proclaim nothing but good. They promise liberation from the age of paper, they proclaim a return to light and joy in life, to unity and refinement, to sincerity and inwardness.

If the German people [*Volk*] returns once more to the true spirit of the image and of creativity, it will have an education; in that way it can become whole again. "Therefore let man educate himself in everything to beauty; let every act be to him an artistic endeavor," Schinkel said. It is exactly the extreme confusion and aberrations in the conceptions of education universally employed by the Germans that suggest that a radical change will soon take place in them. As a more recent poet put it, "Where there is chaos, creation is near." In this case, the spirit of new creation can only be the one that lives in German artists when the word "artist" is understood in

its broadest and best sense. They are the representatives of an education of the heart, while the scholar, as such, worships in principle – and often exclusively – an education of reason.

With regard to the decline of the scientific education that is predominant today, on the one hand, and the emergence of a coming artistic education, on the other, it makes sense to ask about the means to promote, regulate, and bring these developments to a clear conclusion, as best as possible. The German people [*Volk*] in its current education is overripe; in essence, though, this over-ripeness is merely an immaturity, for barbarism is always immature vis-à-vis education, and systematic, scientific, educated barbarism has always been at home in Germany. “You know our Germany; it has not yet stopped being uneducated,” Reuchlin once wrote to Manutius, words that an honest German could still write to another today. Overcultivation is in fact even cruder than a lack of culture. It is here, then, that potential new pedagogical forces must be put to use; to be precise, they will have to work in a way that is precisely contrary to previous and normal education. The people must not be pulled away from nature, but toward it. Through whom? Through itself. And how? By falling back on its own elemental powers. The people itself creates the medicine it needs, or it gropes for it.

The individualism of the Germans

To be sure, the final goal of both national art and education is this: monumentality, style, connectedness [*Gebundenheit*]. But German life must first loosen itself before it can become connected; the bow must be loosened before it can be retied. Three tasks now await the Germans: first, to individualize their spirit, second, to consolidate it, and third, to monumentalize it. Each successive stage in the development is unthinkable without the preceding one.

Individualism is the reigning principle of the world, to the extent that it can be judged from a human perspective; at the same time, however, it is the dominant principle of Germanness. Through such a direct connection to the innermost core of the life of the world, Germany is also marked spiritually and artistically, just as it already is geographically, as a Middle Kingdom, but one that is precisely the opposite of the Asian Middle Kingdom: for it shall be governed, not by the queue and the letter, but by law and the spirit. Only thus can its declining education become a rising one once again, and also prove itself as such vis-à-vis other peoples.

“To have character and to be German is without question synonymous,” Fichte said. The German must return to this quality, which is inborn but which was often lost in the course of time. Precisely in this fractured being, in this centrifugal striving, which has always been characteristic of the German, lies his ability to cast light upon the world and humanity as a whole in such an immensely rich and variegated way. The more he succeeds in making a virtue out of necessity, the more perfectly he will shape his being. His propensity to be individual, to follow his own head – in short, the proverbial and often politically disadvantageous German disunity – enables him in a special way to advance further in the artistic-spiritual sphere than other nations. Individualism is the root of all art; and since the Germans are without a doubt the most peculiar and headstrong of all peoples, they are also – provided they succeed in mirroring the world clearly – the most outstanding of all peoples artistically. In no people of the world does one find so many living caricatures as one does among the Germans, but this deplorable characteristic also has its positive flip-side: it shows that they are very capable of being educated. The more unpolished someone is, the more he can be polished, and the greater the brilliance he can attain. The great future of the Germans rests on their eccentric character. For the same reason, the highest level of their education can only be one filled with art, for a people’s highest level of education must accord with the deepest aspect of its nature; and as I

have said, individualism is the deepest aspect of the German nature. And so instinct is driving the Germans of today in the right direction, as they begin to look more towards artistic expression [*Gestaltung*] than scientific research; but precisely this very instinct should now elevate itself to full consciousness and realize itself in living action. Germany, which led all European and non-European states in the realm of military and social reform, should now do the same in the realm of artistic and spiritual reform. And it can do this if it properly professes that which is the content of its being, the content of art, the content of the world: individualism.

Education in and to a measured individualism is therefore the immediate task of the German people [*Volk*] in the spiritual realm. This new – and yet so old – cast of mind is as far removed from the scientific specialization that is presently dominant as it is from the abstract idealism that prevailed a hundred years ago. Lessing and Schiller wrote about the education of the human race; Goethe himself simply lived as a man; but the task today is not to educate and attain the latter, but rather the German man. For all the losses, one lasting benefit of the current scientific and political development of the German spirit is that it has moved increasingly away from empty abstractions. Though that does not mean that what is right has been attained, the path to the right has been gained: “Humanity, nationality, tribal uniqueness, family character, and individuality are a pyramid whose tip reaches closer to heaven than its base,” Paul de Lagarde has said. It is hard to fully appreciate the value of this great and far-reaching, this primal and genuinely German maxim. With the pendulum of national education having initially swung from idealism to specialization, it must now stop between these two extremes at a healthy individualism. Goethe already differentiated and most emphatically formulated this tripartite scale of German education in accordance with its real value: “In the meantime, we shall hope and wait to see what we Germans will be like about a century from now, and whether we will have reached the point at which we are no longer abstract scholars and philosophers, but human beings.” The barbarian is set against man, and the barbarian’s nature is one of immoderation, towards one side or another. The transcendental thinking of the Germans of old thus shares certain flaws with the material thinking of the German of today; the former considers itself as far above nature as the later considers itself below nature; there is thus a point where Kant and Büchner meet.

He who is a real German is also a real human, but by no means the reverse. On this, precisely, rests the merit of Germanness, which has been aspired to in this century, just as humanity was in the previous one. The secret lies in binding oneself to one’s individuality, but not letting oneself be bound by it. The German must, in a sense, contradict himself in order to do justice to his higher calling; he must elevate his individuality – that which seems free and devoid of law – into law; he must construct himself. For what is individual is useful only when it is separated from purely personal arbitrariness, when it takes its place in the great edifice of a people and the world, when it serves. Let the German serve Germanness.

Organization produces, disorganization consumes. It is therefore desirable that the rule of mediocrities comes to an end in Germany, and that these mediocrities subordinate themselves once again to what is truly great, that they become humble, that they allow themselves to be educated. The first step to that end is self-knowledge. He who possesses little personality is only the fragment of a human being, not a human being. He who does not possess or demonstrate a personality at all is a zero. And “all zeros of the world are, as far as their content and value are concerned, equal to a single zero,” Leonardo declared; and this applies, of course, also to the many zeros in Germany today. If the great One of genuine individualism were placed before them, the national spiritual capacity of the Germans would increase quite surprisingly. And it can only be placed before them by having spiritual individuals – be they of the past or the present – return to lead them at the top.

Historical ideals

Every individuality is composed of a number of qualities; it is precisely the nature of these qualities and the way in which they are grouped according to one inclination or another that form an individuality. If one can describe a comparative overview of all of the unalterable qualities of a people as a cross section of its character, then a summarizing overview of the host of men who have superbly developed and exemplified these same qualities in the course of history can be regarded as a longitudinal section of precisely this individuality of a people. The cross section is theoretical in nature, the longitudinal section is practical in nature; it represents, figuratively speaking, the hall of ancestors of this particular spirit of a people. Every quality of the latter finds here one or more chief representative; the virtues as well as the faults of a people become flesh in the course of history. – So, too, among the Germans. “The Germans are honest people,” Shakespeare already said: Luther’s as well as Bismarck’s qualities rest on this honesty. The Germans have been considered brave since time immemorial: Winkelried and Frederick the Great attest to it; likewise, their thinking is embodied in Leibniz and Kant, their poetry in Walther von der Vogelweide and Goethe, their singing in Bach and Mozart. Other traits of the nation’s character have concentrated themselves in other men; all of them together, finally, make up the spiritual physiognomy of the people. And it is this that one must probe if one wishes to discover something about a people’s duties and responsibilities and predetermined fates. Needless to say, the answer will be very different, depending on time and circumstances; of course, sometimes one quality will have to be considered the leading one, sometimes another. But it will always be the look back into the past, into a past filled by men of action, that can serve as the norm for the future. A people will be educated for a healthy future by its past; and the present is to determine and convey the proper relationship between the two. This is the scale on which one measures a people.

This much is clear: Germany cannot relinquish its ideals without relinquishing itself. In and of itself, the historicizing and scientific direction of our present time does not stand in opposition to this – for it would be a very superficial judgment if one were to assume that a *Weltanschauung* that is grounded in reality could or had to forego deeper, spiritual content. Education itself never marches backwards; like a tree, it always lays down new rings that incorporate the old ones: this is called growth. Accordingly, the Germans of today, whose grandfathers possessed an idealistic and whose fathers an historical education, must add up the educational results of the two previous generations by choosing for themselves – historical ideals. These ideals are the heroes of the spirit, ancestors of the *Volk*, representatives of its character traits that are destined, at the present and in the time immediately at hand, to emerge on the surface of history. “There is only one bliss, and that is to reform oneself and to be wise enough to be completely noble,” says the much-underrated Grabbe; and those spirits can help the German attain such bliss. They are the reflections of his own, most beautiful existence; against them, the *Volk* may measure its accomplishments and its powers and goals; in them it honors itself. They serve as the crystallization points for the spiritual development of a *Volk* at any given time; they form the high school for which it must prepare itself for its future fates; in short, they are the educators of their *Volk*.

Only spirit can invoke spirit; Faust descended to the mothers; the German today must ascend to his fathers – in order to find the key to the future. A fully alive figure that a *Volk* has before its eyes means a hundred times more than a slogan or a theory; the saying, “men, not measures,” also holds true here. Goethe pointed the way when he said: “What is original in us is best

preserved and invigorated when we do not lose sight of our ancestors.” Like can be recognized only by like; a *Volk* understands itself in its own *Volk* comrades; this is the advantage of historical over other ideals. The former surpass the latter in the inner continuity of life. New fire is kindled from the old.

The institution of “compurgators” represents an ancient German and Greek legal custom; a properly understood cult of heroes, however, is a kind of ethical compurgation that the *Volk* invokes for its last and most able qualities. The individualistic principle, which largely dominates the German, often imparted something unsteady, scattered, and disintegrative to his nature; this has confirmed itself so far not only in political but also in spiritual things; it is precisely in contrast to this that these historical ideals offer a solidifying support. They must function as total personalities; they can and should be radiant banners around which rally the host of those who today are fighters, strivers, earnest seekers. They shall be models; not for scholars, though, but for doers; not as food for epicures, but as food for the core of the *Volk*. Practically speaking, it is of little value to bottle genius, as is done today in Shakespeare and Goethe societies. Instead, genius should be savored at its source; only in that way can it have a fortifying and enriching effect. Special times, of course, require that one look up to a special heroic image; when it comes to the choice of the latter, the need of the times and the spiritual current are crucial. Conversely, its influence on the various spheres of life in a given age will depend on the particular movements and problems that happen to fill it. In political times one must look to political heroes, in artistic times to artistic heroes; but always the critical thing is not to imitate what is transitory in these men, their unique accomplishment, but what is lasting, their inner nature. In every case, one must observe and follow not what is coincidental, but what is necessary, not the individual man, but the nature of the national soul in him. Then one will harvest the corresponding fruits from that community of the spirit, that cult of the hero, that self-understanding of the spirit of the *Volk*. A people that applies this method of education to itself will not lack for strength any more than did Antaeus as long as he was touching his earth mother – for it has remained true to itself.

The great, conservative trait, which alone imparts to a national life the spirit of steadfastness – and therefore that which it indispensably requires for a healthy existence and what one might call the style of national life – is something that any people, hence also the German one, will find only by linking up with the great and truly creative spiritual powers of its own past: with its historical ideals. From them we can expect the same limiting, regulating, norm-creating influence inwardly that the political reorganization of Germany has in part exercised on it outwardly and will continue to do so in the future; they stand in the middle between art and politics, leading from the latter to the former.

It is a highly refined and entirely individualistic, but also deeply meaningful, trait of the German national soul that old German law – especially with the already mentioned institution of compurgators – regarded the purely personal conviction as a legal argument; in other words, that here personality and subjectivity assume objective value, as it were. Precisely because this usage is so old, and precisely because it is diametrically opposed to the now dominant Roman legal notions, it proves in what high regard the German holds personality as such, and how essentially foreign modern science – which aims at objectivity, though frequently produces nothing but a lack of color and character – is to his heart. “He who is missing himself can only be healed if he is prescribed himself,” wrote the deeply thoughtful and deeply sensitive Novalis; put into modern German, one would say: “He who is suffering from objectivity can only be healed by being prescribed subjectivity.” Now, to the extent that we are dealing with an artistic age that is dawning in Germany, the leading spirits – the historical ideals that are critical for

such an age – must be looked for among the people’s artistic heroes. The future path and direction of German education will evidently be marked out by those men who, during the entire course of German history to date, appear as the bearers of the highest education. In them is given the fixed mathematical points, so to speak, that make it possible to project the general outlines of the coming German education; if one connects these points in a line and extends them, one arrives at the proper goal. It is remarkable, however, that until now it was not scholars but artists who constituted the greatest highpoints of German education by far. Walther von der Vogelweide and Dürer, Shakespeare and Rembrandt, Goethe and Beethoven – [they] should be regarded as such highpoints, not Renaissance philologists or natural scientists of today.

The model for today: Rembrandt

Every true education is educative, formative, creative, and also artistic; that being so, one must gladly welcome the fact that our *Volk* is now slowly turning away from the one-sidedly dominant science and toward art. This is the mental axial shift that is taking place first of all within German life; the only question now is in what form and under which banner it is to be carried out.

If the Germans are an individual *Volk* by preference, only the most individual of artists can serve as their spiritual guide in the sphere of art, for such a man is most likely to point them back toward themselves. And among all German artists, the most individual is – Rembrandt. The German wants to follow his own head, and nobody did more so than Rembrandt. In this sense, he must almost be called the most German of all German painters, and even the most German of all German artists. Needless to say, his outward importance does not yet accord with such an elevated and unique inner worth; he is appreciated, but not enough. Rembrandt is the prototype of the German artist; as a model he is therefore in perfect harmony with many desires and needs that the German *Volk* of today has in mind – even if some of them are unconscious. Under circumstances different from the present ones, some other great German could and would have to take on this role; now that the Germans are suffering in their education from specialization and hackneyed patterns, the pronounced universalist and individualist Rembrandt can help them. He can lead them back to themselves. He is the relevant historical ideal for the time at hand; he is the fixed point from which new, promising educational forms can start. Rembrandt, however, was Dutch by birth. It is revealing and an external confirmation of the eccentric character of the Germans that their most national artist is only inwardly part of them, but not also politically; the German national spirit had, so to speak, driven the national body apart. That must now change: spirit and body, in the *Volk* as well as in the individual, shall come together again. The rupture that runs through modern culture must close again. And only a living human being, cast into the abyss like Curtius, can close it; Rembrandt is such a person. His personality, in its utter unaffectedness and hyper-individuality, seems like an effective antidote to German pedantry, which has already caused so much harm. This man does not fit into any template; he defies all attempts to lay him down on any kind of learned Procrustean bed. He cannot be turned into academic programs and school formulas, as is the case with Raphael and others; he is who he is: Rembrandt.

Perhaps the German has such a proclivity for rules only because his character is by nature a ruleless one; he seeks correction, complementarity; but he should look for such complementarity more inside than outside himself; he should cleanse himself from the errors of his individualism by elevating healthy individualism into a principle. In doing so, he will fortify his nature and limit it without diminishing or harming it. He needs educational types, but not educational templates; for a type forms itself from the inside out, a template, however, from the outside in; that is a fundamental difference. “One thing is not suitable for all.” Just as Greek

artists possessed, in the canon of Polyclites, a normal figure drawn from the people itself, to whose measurements they always adjusted their pictorial works, thereby imparting to the same that character of calm and uniformity and harmony that is the chief virtue of Greek art, so do the German artist and the German man conversely possess, in a figure like Rembrandt, a model of what is animated and distinct, [a model] of a man of individual talents, which forms a fundamental trait of the German character and thus also of German art. The two relate to each other like homophony to polyphony. For the duties and responsibilities of peoples are very different; one fate has befallen the Greeks, another the Germans; the former a concentric, the latter an eccentric nature. And the restless German spirit was probably never juxtaposed to the calm spirit of antiquity more beautifully than in Hölderlin's profoundly German saying: "We are nothing; what we seek is everything." If one compares it with the notion of Olympian calm and self-sufficiency, which is drawn from the deepest depth of the Greek spirit, this contrast becomes even more palpable; "we seek nothing; what we are is everything," the Greeks might have said.

To find the path back to truth, the Germans must simply become mindful of themselves: "This I call a German look, strong, well-bred, and refined," Rahel said. God and humans, poets and prophets, man and woman call out to the German: be German! The Germans, as a people, are now strong; but "well-bred" only in part, and "refined" even less. – For their education is false, and the false is never refined. He who gives up the invaluable good of his individuality for the cheap finery of a false education is not wiser than the Negro who sells his land and his freedom for a bottle of fake rum and a few beads of glass. Strong, well-bred, and refined – is the character of Bach's music; with it and towards it the Germans should form themselves; strong, well-bred, and refined – is the content of Rembrandt's painting; in it the Germans should immerse themselves. The "well-tempered clavier" left behind by the former, and the carefully developed scale of chiaroscuro by the latter are educational tools of the highest order; they are such in the literal and the figurative sense, in the artistic-professional and the human sense; they are such in the German sense.

Originality is not the goal but the precondition of all artistry. It is given in Rembrandt as an exemplar; the German must pass through it if he wishes to become something spiritually. This is the educational meaning of this great artist. As one speaks of Caesarism, one could also speak of Rembrandtism, only that the latter is exactly the opposite of the former: for the former centralizes a people externally, the latter individualizes it internally. The new must pick up from the old, but only at the point where it is freest, and German culture to date is freest in Rembrandt. Today, many things are examined under the microscope; it would be good to look at some things under the macroscope, for a change; *audiatur et altera pars* [let the other part be heard also]. In that spirit, I have made the attempt here to measure, not a man against time, but time – the present – against one man. As a rule, it has little effect on modern non-persons if one says to them: become human beings. Perhaps it will have a greater effect if one points them toward a specific person and calls out to them: become human beings like Rembrandt. Needless to say, that refers not to the level of his talent, but to its quality. This kind of humanness does not need to be grasped by reason, does not need to be drawn from books; it can be seen with the eyes and felt with the heart; it is no departure into ideal and unknown strange lands; it is a return to the ancestral home.

Source: Julius Langbehn, *Rembrandt als Erzieher [Rembrandt as Educator]*(1890). 37th edition. Leipzig: C. L. Hirschfeld, 1891, pp. 45-58.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap