

Karl Heinz Bohrer's *A Little Pleasure in Decline.* *Essays on Britain*¹

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My friend Karl Heinz Bohrer died on 4 August 2021. He was seen as Germany's leading literary critic, a man both brilliant in perception and prodigious in industry, whose 29 books examine the German classical tradition with reference to the ancient writers whom Karl Heinz had known from his humanist education in Germany. He had polished up a last book shortly before he died which has now been published posthumously.² Karl Heinz wrote in German and very little is available in English. Just one of his books has been translated: *Suddenness*, in 1994.³

But Karl Heinz lived a large part of his life *outside* Germany - it was almost as if his own country was 'too small a bound'. When he was Professor of Modern German Literature at Bielefeld, he lived in Paris with his second wife Undine Grünter and commuted to the Ruhr to deliver his lectures. For three separate periods of his life he indulged his passion for Britain. The first was a short stay, but from 1968 onwards he returned again and again. After he stepped down as literary editor of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* or 'FAZ' in 1974, he ended up being the paper's cultural correspondent in Britain for the rest of the decade. Finally, he was based in London for the last two decades of his life after marrying Angela Bielenberg, née Gräfin von der Schulenburg.

That first short stay was in 1953 and is described in Karl Heinz's first volume of autobiography *Granatsplitter* ('Shrapnel')⁴, as indeed is his immediate post-war fascination with all things British. He was born in Cologne on 26 September 1932 and was twelve when the war ended. On his mother's side he had Irish roots, which might have made him inclined to like the British soldiers who occupied the Rhineland. He developed a fondness for white bread and tinned sardines and, more importantly, his grandfather took him to see British films. Laurence Olivier's *Henry V* of 1944 made a big impression on him.

But another influence beckoned when he was sent from his humanist 'Gymnasium' or grammar school to a liberal boarding school in the Black Forest in the French Zone. There, he became aware of French cinema and existentialist philosophy. He was keen on drama at school, and even studied it briefly at University in Cologne before migrating to a more conventional study of German at Göttingen and Heidelberg, where he took his doctorate.

Karl Heinz taught German briefly in Sweden, but his early years were spent in cultural journalism rather than academic life, firstly on the cultural pages of *Die Welt* in Hamburg and later in Frankfurt am Main, where he took on the most important critical role in Germany as the Literary Editor of the *FAZ* in 1968.

In 1974, he handed over the reins to the redoubtable Marcel Reich-Ranicki. He submitted his second doctorate or 'Habilitation' on Ernst Jünger in 1977 and was appointed to the University of Bielefeld, where he was Professor of Modern German Literature from 1982 to 1987. This reversion to academic life had an ulterior motive: he had been promised the editorship of the intellectual monthly *Merkur*

1 Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Ein bißchen Lust am Untergang. Englische Ansichten* (Carl Hanser Verlag 1979). The book consists of a number of newspaper articles written for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and one taken from the journal *Merkur*. Subsequent footnotes will state also the title and date of the article being referenced.

2 Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Was alles so vorkommt. Dreizehn alltägliche Phantasiestücke* (Suhrkamp 2021).

3 Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Suddenness: On the Moment of Aesthetic Appearance* (Columbia University Press 1994).

4 Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Granatsplitter* (Carl Hanser Verlag 2012).

in succession to Hans Schwab-Felisch, but the editor needed to be a chair-holding professor. He was appointed to the post in 1984, standing down in 2011.⁵

Siren-like, England continued to beckon from across the North Sea. Karl Heinz's daughter Beatrice told me of arriving in Dover with her father, who informed her she was going to live in a 'great country'. The Bohrs descended at an important moment in British post-war history, and, as it so happens, it is one that I also remember well, as it represented the period between my leaving school and leaving university. Britain was still locked in its post-war insularity. We had joined the Common Market on 1 January 1973, but there was no noticeable change in the way we lived our lives. In 1975 we had our first ever national referendum when elements on the right and left attempted to reverse the decision taken by Edward Heath's government two years before. The word 'sovereignty' was on all lips. Europeans – foreigners – apparently didn't understand the joys of sovereignty.

Karl Heinz got to know a very different world to postwar West Germany. Middle and upper-class Britain was fiercely white, Anglican, and profoundly snobbish. Society was small and exclusive. I was related to no one and came from an obscure if independent school. In order to make sure little Johnny or Charlie was in safe hands, my Oxford friends' parents (like the friends themselves) would extract the following details within the first ten minutes of conversation: name of school, religion, father's occupation (and possibly how much he earned), and whether you were related to anyone grand or famous. As a Catholic from a single-parent household whose mother struggled as a painter and art-teacher I was not promising, but Catholics were nonetheless better than Baptists or Unitarians. Like Jews there were a few grand ones, although my Irish name meant there was little chance of associating me with the Brideshead set. Countless hapless undergraduates put on plumy accents or pretended to have gone to more famous schools than the ones they actually attended. In later life, they improved their CVs by saying they had gone to better-known colleges or universities.

This cosy, exclusive world was cracking up in the face of economic and social crisis. Most of the members of my still single-sex college were from state schools, but the public schoolboys, above all the 'top-ten' public schoolboys, were much louder, so that you could be forgiven for not noticing the others. Karl Heinz's love for Britain did not silence his critical voice. In 1975, the year I went up, he noted the 'decrepit factories, the shrinking industrial production, the irrational labour models, the archaic structure of the unions, the pitiful understanding of British managers for the needs of foreign markets, their tendency to invest abroad, but not at home'. He wasn't beating a drum, but Germans did better work, and on time. 'The words "efficiency" and "plan" are unknown to British ears... Rationalising is control and control is unacceptable. The more you know that you are swimming against the tide the more enjoyable it seems to push these new possibilities to one side'.⁶ It was a decline that had started in the 1890s, when Britain had failed to keep up with Germany and the US. He quoted Arthur Koestler, who recognised this national suicide. It was the time when many British satirical films, from *I'm Alright Jack* to *Heavens Above*, sent up the malaise that affected so many areas of British life.

5 Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Jetzt. Geschichte meines Abenteuers mit der Phantasie* (Suhrkamp 2017) 225.

6 Bohrer (n 1) 13–14. 'Die englische Krankheit, Politische und psychologische Ursachen', 27 September 1975.

Not for nothing did many of these satires revolve around strikes. In October 1977, Karl Heinz focussed on *New Statesman* editor Paul Johnson's decision to leave the Labour Party after twenty-four years of membership. The cause was Tony Benn – then still mostly referred to as Anthony Wedgewood-Benn – who had fought British membership of the Common Market and was the unions' champion. This need to put trade union collectivism before all else had proved the last straw for Johnson: 'Johnson must now write letters to the workers saying that the health of a single apprentice is more important than the possibility of literary self-expression'.⁷ For Karl Heinz, the English disease was 'alienation from the future'.⁸

He travelled to Manchester, a city redolent of 'Manchester economics', the 'Manchester' *Guardian*, Marx and Engels. The city had its attractions: 'Without style, yet stylish; without beauty, yet beautiful'.⁹ The famous mills had been turned into shopping centres. In November 1971, he was in Yorkshire in the 'filthy triangle'¹⁰ enclosed by Leeds, Pontefract and Normanton. The industrial landscape was dying. He found no job prospects for the young people at the local grammar school.

It wasn't only Manchester and Leeds. He visited Highgate Cemetery, pausing to pour scorn on the ugly, *kitschig* monument to Karl Marx. Marx's disciples had attached love letters to its plinth: 'The man is in no way dead. He lives. They speak to him constantly'.¹¹ Karl Heinz was more interested in the part of the cemetery that occupies the higher ground on the other side of the road. This part was closed to visitors (fifty years on it is only open for guided tours). It was overgrown and crumbling, reminding him of an exotic rainforest. The economic crisis meant that the cemetery could not afford gardeners or maintenance: 'Gothic horror is literally present everywhere, as under every cubic metre dead Victorians are rotting'.¹² In one spot he saw the skull of an MP in a broken coffin. Grave robbers had helped themselves to objects from the newspaper baron Julius Beer's grave. There was a plan to replace the western part of the cemetery by tower blocks, shrouding the imperial dead.

Karl Heinz had revelled in the romantic aspect of Highgate Cemetery. He was most at home writing about literature, theatre, and art. He was a fully signed-up aesthete possessing a collection of dashing hats. He celebrated the centenary of Liberty's in Regent Street in 1975, at the same time as Biba in Kensington High Street, a magnet for us teenagers in the early seventies, hit skid row. Liberty's had been the champion of 'arts & crafts' in the late nineteenth century; proper design was a central tenet of Ruskin's aesthetic teaching. In London, Karl Heinz discovered Blake and the Pre-Raphaelites only then becoming fashionable in Britain. He saw the symbolism of Blake as something that prefigured the writings of his beloved Baudelaire. In January 1971 (before he took up residence in London), Karl Heinz applied his German mind to the ramifications of Pre-Raphaelitism: the Nazarenes, Novalis, and Stefan George. The Pre-Raphaelites were reacting against Manchester. Inspired by Ruskin, the soul was 'the adversary of society'.¹³ As champions of aestheticism, Beardsley

7 *ibid* 103. 'Das Gespenst des Kollektivismus', 8 October 1977. Johnson had stood down as editor in 1970.

8 *ibid* 117. 'Die Stummen und die Schreienden. In den Schächten des Untergrunds von London South East', 26 April 1975.

9 *ibid* 22. 'O Manchester', 8 January 1977.

10 *ibid* 32. 'Eine Begebenheit in Yorkshire. Fatalismus und Stolz. Englische Bergarbeiter am Rande Europas', 20 November 1971.

11 *ibid* 74. 'Der Totenwald von Highgate. Symbolismus und Horror. Die Victorianer und ihre vergesslichen Enkel', 22 November 1975.

12 *ibid* 75.

13 *ibid* 89. 'Die Präraffaeliten, oder Die Seele als Widersacher der

and Wilde were often invoked. Aestheticism was at the heart of the beauty of sudden ideas, which inspired Karl Heinz's literary study, *Suddenness* (published in English in 1994).¹⁴

Wilde lived a double-life. He also hankered after the demimonde, a seedy existence in anonymous hotel rooms. In this context, Karl Heinz invokes Theodor Fontane, who was a journalist for the *Vossische Zeitung* in London from 1856 to 1858, as he metamorphosed from pharmacist to Prussia's greatest novelist. Fontane learned what was to become the foundation stone of the gutter press in late nineteenth century Britain: that the population loved a good murder above all else, and that Victorian London served them well - people had a tendency to disappear, leaving only the odd limb to remember them by.

Certain institutions got the thumbs up. The theatre, for example, generally thrilled. The earliest article in the collection dates from November 1968 and was written in the course of his second ever visit to England. He saw the film *Blow Up* (1966), the very essence of 'Swinging London' and one of three David Hemmings films mentioned. Another was the *Charge of the Light Brigade*, with its debunking of empire and use of animation - another period piece. *Blow Up* caused him to reminisce about 1953, and seeing John Gielgud, Richard Burton, John Neville, and Michael Redgrave on stage at the Old Vic. It was another age: 'There was no John Osborne then, and why? Young men did not need to be angry yet because they could remember food rationing from the difficult time when Britain's fighter pilots had not yet become the legend about whom Churchill had said that it was rare for so many to have owed so much to so few'.¹⁵

In 1976, he saw Terry Hands' *Henry V* cycle at Stratford with Alan Howard as Hal. Karl Heinz remembered Olivier, whom he had met briefly at a party in Drayton Gardens in the autumn of 1953 and where he told the actor 'I like you very much', something which Olivier naturally appreciated.¹⁶ He approved of this new, less nationalistic and propagandistic approach to Olivier's wartime performance. There was no longer a need for propaganda, but he recognised 'England's love-affair with itself' for all that.¹⁷

Oh What a Lovely War was another manifestation of the British obsession with war, which Karl Heinz contrasted with the rather more responsible approach adopted by middle-class Germans. Of course it was an anti-war play and later film, where the devil came on dressed in military uniform. History was popular in Britain and 'the present was always stamped with the past'.¹⁸ The film once again showed the usual Britons, dominated by arts graduates from Oxford and Cambridge who were proud of their ignorance when it came to science. There were German plays to see too. Karl Heinz went to Manchester in 1976 to watch the first ever British production of Kleist's *Prince of Homburg*, with Tom Courtenay in the title role.¹⁹

Gesellschaft', 30 January 1971.

14 Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Plötzlichkeit. Zum Augenblick des ästhetischen Scheins* (Suhrkamp 1981).

15 Bohrer (n 1) 181. 'Manchmal Löwe, manchmal Einhorn'. 16 November 1968.

16 ibid 235. 'Rückkehr zum Heroismus. Heinrich V, verlorener Haufen als nationales Märchen', 5 June 1976; Bohrer (n 4) 315. I saw these productions. Karl Heinz doesn't mention Timothy West, who was a wonderful Falstaff.

17 Bohrer (n 1) 235.

18 ibid 166. 'Oh! What a lovely war, die Lust der Engländer an vergangenen Schlachten ist mehr als ein Tick', 7 June 1969.

19 A quarter of a century later there was a new version performed at the

Karl Heinz also had an eye for the BBC. In April 1977 he listed some of the series that were then popular: *The Avengers*, *The Forsyte Saga*, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, *Upstairs, Downstairs* (forerunner to *Downton Abbey*). The BBC had not declined like other British institutions over the past thirty years. 'The television drug can taste better nowhere else than England', and yet, like everyone else in the country, the BBC had an obsession with the Second World War.²⁰ He cited *Dad's Army* in particular. It is an obsession that Britain retains, even when few obsessives can actually remember why and when it occurred and who won it (besides Britain).

On the eve of the 1975 referendum, Karl Heinz had cause to write once more about British xenophobia. He was inspired by a television series about Colditz. Good-looking, aristocratic British officers ran rings around ugly Germans. Politicians like Hans-Dietrich Genscher, Helmut Kohl, and Franz-Josef Strauss supplied the image of the ridiculous German. The British depicted their own in a more flattering light: 'England is a narcissus who will never grow tired of looking at himself in the mirror'.²¹

On the other hand, German ugliness, philistinism, and provincialism would rouse Karl Heinz throughout his life. He took pot-shots at Germany from London and Paris. Heine is the obvious model. He was nonetheless passionate in his defence of the men of 20 July 1944, and his later marriage to one of the daughters of Fritz-Dietlof Graf von der Schulenburg can only have added new vim to this view. Films such as *Massacre in Rome* (1975), with its fictionalised focus on the killings in the Ardeatine Caves, were a mixed blessing. In Britain, where 'talking about Hitler was the same as talking about the Germans', the 20 July was dismissed as 'a false purge in the interests of a national cover-up'.²² It is an attitude that has failed to go away, even now when we know so much more about the motives of the men and women from all walks of life who conspired to eliminate Hitler. Only three years ago both Karl Heinz and I reacted to a debunking book on Stauffenberg and a vilification of the same that appeared in the letters page of the *Spectator*.

The campaign to remain in the Common Market came to a head at the moment of the 1975 Cup Final when two London teams - West Ham and Fulham - faced one another on the pitch. Karl Heinz juxtaposes the two events. Edward Heath and Roy Jenkins were the champions of the remain lobby then, and held their final rally in Trafalgar Square. In the far corner were Tony Benn and Michael Foot. 'How can we compare our sovereignty with that of people who have never possessed any: we are English'.²³

There were rumblings from hoi polloi much as there had been in the fifties, at the time of the Angry Young Men. Punk was 'the last stage of British nihilism, the decline into youth anarchy'.²⁴ He seized on the message of hatred embodied in the music of the Sex Pistols, the early works of Derek Jarman, the film of Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, and Nigel Williams' play *Class Enemy* at the Royal Court.

Lyric in Hammersmith.

20 Bohrer (n 1) 68. 'BBC. Mythos und Wirklichkeit', 26-7 April 1977.

21 ibid 135. 'Wie fremdenfeindlich ist England? Am deutschen Beispiel geschildert', 5 June 1975.

22 ibid 150. 'Der deutsche Widerstand und die Briten. Eine Diskussion im Deutschen Historischen Institut London', 1 March 1977.

23 ibid 141. 'Cup Final oder: Die zweite Halbzeit des Kampfes um Europa hat erst begonnen', 10 May 1975.

24 ibid 197. 'Haß als Zeitbombe in einer Gesellschaft ohne Liebe. Punk-Kultur und Kulturkritik'. 13 April 1978.

Karl Heinz later wrote a literary study of Dionysus²⁵, and something of his interest in the Dionysiac must have fed his enthusiasm for the 1977 Notting Hill Carnival, where a small riot marred an otherwise admirable effusion of black culture; but it also provided him with a lead into the growing unease in Britain when it came to its black ghettos, and the dark roles played by Enoch Powell and the National Front leader John Tyndall.

Reading the book, you often feel Karl Heinz might have made an excellent playwright himself, or indeed a novelist. In a long essay on the Queen's Silver Jubilee, he writes with wry, funny observations about being a German caught up in all the forced jollity of a patriotic English street party.²⁶ I recall the occasion which I spent at a street party in Oxford. The snobbery and superciliousness of his neighbours is instantly recognisable.

Karl Heinz occasionally took up a political assignment when writing for *Merkur*. In 1976, using connections he had from the 'Preußen-Girls' – his name for the Schulenburg sisters – he went to Northern Ireland during the Troubles. He met Gerry Fitt and other 'luminaries' of the time and was horrified by Belfast: 'the dingiest backyard in Britain (sic)'.²⁷ The Europa Hotel in Belfast had been wrecked many times by bombs. Karl Heinz found its brutalist allures 'frightful'. He dismissed Heinrich Böll's romantic evocation of Ireland, something which I had eagerly purchased after I met the great man in Cologne in 1971.²⁸

As a journalist, Karl Heinz watched the battle in 1977 that saw the end of the *Evening News* and the triumph of its rival the *Evening Standard*. The collection ends with an article from December 1978 on the closure of *The Times*, brought down by the unions that had dominated his time in Britain, and which were to be gelded by the new Conservative government of Mrs Thatcher. Mrs Thatcher is not explored in this book. Britain was to change very quickly under her rule. The small, incestuous world that was British society was soon to become less white, less Anglican, and less dominated by public schools, Oxford, and Cambridge. It was also (for a time at least) much more open to Europe.

Karl Heinz loved Britain and he had plenty of friends here. The last twenty years of his life is partly described by his second volume of autobiography *Jetzt* ('Now'), but formally Britain hardly acknowledged his existence.²⁹ When I tried to interest the *Guardian* in his obituary, they replied that the subject was 'not for their readership'. For much of the time in that last period he was here he taught a semester at Stanford on Hölderlin, but I am not aware of any similar interaction with any British university. It would be an understatement to say Karl Heinz was unhappy at the result of the second referendum on Europe. At the end of his life he lost his long standing faith in Britain and wanted to move to Berlin.

25 Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Das Erscheinen des Dionysos. Antike Mythologie und moderne Metapher* (Suhrkamp 2015).

26 Bohrer (n 1) 203-213. 'Die Fähigkeit zu jubilieren', 9 July 1977.

27 *ibid* 48. 'Der ewige Bürgerkrieg', originally published in *Merkur* 335, 1976.

28 Heinrich Böll, *Irishes Tagebuch* (Kiepenheuer & Witsch 1957).

29 Bohrer (n 5).