

‘History in the garb of a novel’:

Nationalism and Fiction in J. Victor von Scheffel’s *Ekkehard*

Theodor Fontane counted the historical novel *Ekkehard* (1855) among the best books that he had read.¹ He praised the fictional work, set in tenth-century Germany, as “subtle, knowledgeable, virtuous, and humorous.” He argued that the novel even surpassed Walter Scott’s best works, the highest compliment for historical fiction.² Fontane described *Ekkehard*’s author, Joseph Victor von Scheffel (1826-1886), as “[Scott’s] superior in art and erudition; his equal in humor, as well as in his gift for description and in regional patriotism.”³ German literary critics reviewed it positively from its first edition through World War I.⁴ In 1856 the author Paul Heyse rapturously thanked Scheffel for his contribution to German literature and reported that the king of Bavaria,

¹ Theodor Fontane, *Aus dem Nachlass von Theodor Fontane*, ed. Josef Ettlinger (Berlin: F. Fontane & Co., 1908), 235.

² Murray Pittock, ed., *The Reception of Sir Walter Scott in Europe* (London: Continuum, 2006).

³ Fontane, *Aus dem Nachlass*, 235 and 238. He also maintained that *Ekkehard* directly influenced plots of other nineteenth-century novels, including George Hesekeel, *Unter dem Eisenbahn* (1864), and Berthold Auerbach, *Auf der Höhe* (1865).

⁴ The novel’s printing run attests to its popularity among readers and critics alike. The Stuttgart publishing house Metzler printed the ninth edition of Scheffel’s novel in 1874 and the fifty-first only six years later in 1880. Bonz Publishing produced *Ekkehard*’s 100th edition in 1888; its 200th in 1904; and the house’s 294th in 1921.⁴ *Ekkehard* was even translated into three musical settings between 1878 and 1903, and all composers identified their works with a variation on, “interpreted from J. V. v. Scheffel’s novel by the same name.” *Ekkehard* was more than a bestseller; it had become a cultural reference difficult to avoid. Data related to *Ekkehard*’s publication history can be found on the Innsbruck Database for Historical Novels, http://www.uibk.ac.at/germanistik/histrom/cgi/wrapcgi.cgi?wrap_config=hr_bu_all.cfg&nr=56370. For a more detailed discussion of this publication history, see, Werner Wunderlich, “Medieval Images: Joseph Viktor von Scheffel’s Novel *Ekkehard* and St. Gall,” in *Medievalism in the Modern World: Essays in Honor of Leslie Workman*, ed. Richard Utz and Tom Shippey (Turnhout: Brepols, 1998), 203-207.

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Maximilian II, wanted to meet *Ekkehard*'s author.⁵ Enthusiasm for the work extended far beyond Germany. Scheffel's novel had been available in English since 1872 and an abridged version was later published as a textbook for German classes.⁶ Harvard Professor Kuno Francke included a translation of the text in the thirteenth volume of his edited series, *The German Classics*.⁷ By the early 1900s, "Scheffel" had become a household name among New Yorkers, not least because one of the city's most popular beerhalls, on Third Avenue and Seventeenth Street, was named after the German author and decorated with scenes from his writing.⁸ As I researched this novel's impact, I sought to understand why it resonated with such a large audience, and for so long. I argue that its popularity was closely linked with questions of literacy, historicism, and new marketplaces of German readers, subjects that will be reviewed only briefly in this report.

Readers responded, as Fontane noted, to the novel's historical setting, its sense of place, Scheffel's rich description, and its dramatic events. The main plot is relatively straightforward. Set in tenth-century Swabia, the novel follows the romance between a monk and a noblewoman. The novel is crowded: with monks, wicked and virtuous; drunk

⁵ January, 14, 1856, *Briefwechsel zwischen Joseph Victor von Scheffel und Paul Heyse*, ed. Conrad Höfer (Karlsruhe: Scheffelbund, 1932), 18.

⁶ *Ekkehard: A Tale of the Tenth Century*, trans. by Sofie Delffs (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1872). The German-language version was later edited and abridged for German study by Carla Wenckebach as part of Heath's Modern Language Series (Boston: D.C. Heath & Co, 1893). *The Review of Reviews* 9 (1894): 371, describes the importance of Wenckebach's edition: "Scheffel's 'Ekkehard,' an historical novel of the tenth century, has a high place in German prose, but its length has largely unfitted it for school-room use. Prof. Carla Wenckebach, of Wellesley College, has by judicious condensation overcome this difficulty. Her abridgement of the story, with some twenty-five pages of notes, has been given a place in Heath's familiar 'Modern Language Series.'"

⁷ Kuno Francke, ed., *The German Classics of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* 13 (New York: The German Publication Society, 1915), 173-297. Selections from Paul Heyse, Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach, and Heinrich Seidel were also included in this volume.

⁸ Gale Harris, *Scheffel Hall, 190 Third Avenue, Manhattan, Landmarks Preservation Commission Report* (New York, 1997).

stewards; superstitious peasants; a haughty noblewoman; even invading Huns. Its many subplots thematize a familiar repertoire of medieval subjects, from scheming clergy to the pleasures of rural life. Once so highly regarded, however, *Ekkehard* has fallen from favor and its resonance with earlier readers is initially hard to reconstruct. Scheffel's archaizing prose now sounds alienating rather than authentically medieval. The novel, furthermore, seems profoundly unhistorical, whereas readers once valued its historical veracity.

Scheffel claimed that *Ekkehard* provided historical insight equal to academic analysis. In a letter to an old friend dated November 30, 1854, he emphasized the veracity of his novel, "which, in a playful way, reflects the culture and the spiritual life of a long-lost era. Moreover, if one were to strip away the psychological framework of the story, it could easily be included in a series of scholarly essays."⁹ Perhaps; but Scheffel ultimately believed that that the "psychological framework of the story" enriched his historical narrative. He admitted that he had occasionally taken liberties with persons and dates, and in *Ekkehard*'s preface quoted the great English historian Thomas Macaulay in his defense: "I shall cheerfully bear the reproach of having descended below the dignity of history, if I can succeed in placing before the English of the nineteenth century a true picture of the life of their ancestors."¹⁰ Scheffel asserted that his work not only reconstructed the historical record; *Ekkehard* also reanimated the past for its readers, despite its temporal distance. Yet his deprecation sounds at best slightly disingenuous when coupled with the lengthy footnotes that Scheffel provided to support his fictional

⁹ *Joseph Victor von Scheffel: Ein Lebensbild in Briefen*, ed. Willibald Klinker (Zürich: Gute Schriften, 1947), 110.

¹⁰ Thomas Babington Macaulay, *The History of England I* (London: Heron Books, 1967; first published 1848), 3.

narrative.¹¹ He went to great lengths to convince his readers that this particular historical novel belonged on a spectrum with academic historical writing, based on the merits of his scholarly research.¹²

Scheffel did not rely solely upon textual sources. He finished the last chapters of his manuscript in Switzerland among sites from his novel, claiming that he drew inspiration from his surroundings. He traipsed in the ruins of Hohentwiel castle, hiked up Säntis peak, and visited the mountain hermitage, *Wildkirchlein*, where his protagonist briefly lived.¹³ Unlike medieval sources that had to be interpreted, he found the German historical past immanent in nature. History somehow possessed Scheffel during his time in the Swiss-German borderland, “mind and soul filled with the life of bygone generations,” a dual process of poetic inspiration and historical intuition.¹⁴ In the great nineteenth-century German tradition, physical setting was indispensable to learning about himself and about German history.¹⁵ Scheffel’s personal motto, “we learn through travel,” *ambulando discimus*, spoke to landscape’s function in his fiction and in his philosophy of

¹¹ These footnotes confirmed Scheffel’s thick description of the medieval world, substantiating everything from local *Sprichwörter* to medieval clothing. Printed editions of medieval primary sources supplied the bulk of his proof. The two most frequently cited sourcebooks were Jacob Grimm and Andreas Schmeller’s *Lateinische Gedichte des X. und XI. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen: Dieter, 1838), and the ongoing series, *Monumenta Germaniae historica* (MGH), Historical Monuments of Germany, ed. Georg Pertz (Hanover: Hahn, 1826).

¹² Footnotes, as a signal of credentials or evidentiary legitimacy, had become scholarly convention by this point in the nineteenth-century. See Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1997), 190-222.

¹³ The text reflected his familiarity with the region: he supplied approximately correct walking times, as well as accurate descriptions of vistas from the area’s peaks. J. V. Scheffel, *Ekkehard. Eine Geschichte aus dem zehnten Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt a. M.: Meidinger, 1855; repr., Zurich: Diogenes Verlag, 1984), 431-436. Pagination refers to the Diogenes edition.

¹⁵ On the relation between location and Germanness, see Celia Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials: The German Idea of Heimat* (Berkeley: University of California, 1990) and Mack Walker, *Germany Home Towns: Community, State, and General Estate 1648-1871* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1971).

history. Scheffel reproduced in text the historical immanence that he experienced in Swiss-German nature. His readers did not have to agonize through historical sources; they merely had to replicate his immersion in history through his frequent, and detailed, descriptions of landscape. Scheffel's audience could apprehend the medieval world directly from *Ekkehard*.¹⁶

Scheffel's claims to historical truth were based in part on critical methodology and yet he asserted that he was not trying to reproduce historical writing. As Brent Peterson has concluded, "these two modes of writing about the past were locked in a kind of structural opposition, each defined by the other, each becoming what the other was not, and each making claims that still need adjudicating."¹⁷ Despite footnotes emphasizing his familiarity with sources that demanded a great deal of specialized knowledge, Scheffel's Middle Ages were neither alienating nor particularly distant from the nineteenth century. He lessened the foreignness of medieval Swabia by describing the shared customs that spanned the thousand-year separation. He was able to do this, in part, because of genre. Histories of modern Germany focused on states and institutions; historical novels focused on the everyday and the intimate, a history of a German affinity for local customs.

Historical novels like *Ekkehard*, set in the Middle Ages, were foundational texts for the German national canon because they so obviously thematized the relations between the German past and present.¹⁸ The work bridged popular and academic

¹⁶ "[One] approach regards realism as belief in both the transparency of language and its ability to reflect external reality," Brent O. Peterson, *History, Fiction, and Germany: Writing the Nineteenth-Century Nation* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 36.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁸ On the creation of this national canon, see Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *Literarische Kultur im Zeitalter des Liberalismus 1830-1870* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1985). See this conversation in Lynn Tatlock, ed., *Publishing Culture and the "Reading Nation": German Book History in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Rochester: Camden House, 2010); Lynn Abrams, "Contexts of

conceptions of medieval history, borrowing conventions from both. Scheffel, and other authors like him, created a hybrid genre that appealed to a mass audience. Yet his work found a broad readership only after German unification in 1871. There are many plausible hypotheses for this timing. The German economy entered a recession in the late 1870s and perhaps the novel offered escape to a stable, pre-industrial culture. The example of Scheffel Hall in New York City, mentioned above, suggests another explanation. Newspaper articles and short stories from the time referred to the building as shorthand for Germany. Built in a revival style imitating the Heidelberg castle, it was purposefully antiquated, much like the novel itself. O. Henry set a short story in the beer hall and simply called it, “Old Munich.” This geographical imprecision – Scheffel was not himself from Munich – points to how *Ekkehard* and its author had become synecdoches for Germany, and for a larger project of nationalization, by the end of the nineteenth century. Scheffel and Munich could become coterminous only after Germany had gained a capacious range of metonyms, historical and geographical. His novel could not have become popular before 1871 because it appealed to a national audience, and marketplace of readers, that did not yet exist. *Ekkehard* functions as a case study to assess new German readerships at home and abroad, bound by a shared cultural and political referent.

the Novel: Society, Politics and Culture in German-Speaking Europe, 1870 to the Present,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Modern German Novel*, ed. Graham Barton (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2004); and Russell A. Berman, *The Rise of the Modern German Novel: Crisis and Charisma* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1986).