
Friedrich Torberg: An Introduction

Friedrich Torberg (1908–1979) was very much a part of the Prague and Viennese literary café scenes in the 1920s and 1930s. He wrote a wicked schoolboy novel, *Der Schüler Gerber hat absolviert* (Berlin, 1930) [*The Examination* (London, 1932)]—the only one of his works which appears to have been translated into English—which catapulted him into the limelight of the café Herrenhof scene of Max Brod, Ernst Polak, and Alfred Polgar; in Vienna he associated with Karl Kraus, Franz Werfel, Robert Musil, Hermann Broch, and others. Three more novels published before the war were all well-enough received, but did not succeed in getting the critics past their notion of him as a bad boy cynic and lampooner. Torberg went to Zurich, then to Paris in 1938, where he remained in close association with many of the same people he knew from Prague and Vienna, including Georg Kaiser and Max Reinhardt. After sojourns in New York and Los Angeles in 1940, he settled in New York City in 1944, and was granted U. S. citizenship the following year. He returned to Vienna in 1951 as a dedicated Austro-Hungarian, and seems to have spent much of the rest of his life trying to recapture the past that was lost with the war. Torberg's book *Die Tante Jolesch* (Munich, 1975) is a collection of coffeehouse anecdotes that made him famous again and he remains best known today as a Roaring Twenties-Thirties aesthete and high-living *Café Literat*. The last phase of his career included much postwar work as a journalist, mainly on the Left, as well as theater criticism, poetry, some plays, diaries, letters, and autobiographical writings.

As this brief account would suggest, Torberg himself was an external immigrant: that is, he left Vienna after the Nazis came to town on the eleventh of March, 1938, the date he describes as decisive in a little essay of 1948 called “What is the Poet's Fatherland?” (“*Was ist des Dichters Vaterland?*”), with its titular pun on the nineteenth-century question about German nationhood and Germans, “*Was ist des Deutschen Vaterland?*”, or “What is a German's fatherland?”—the question asked by so many of the German-speaking Fortyeighters in their search for a nation-state. The fact that the Germans, the Austrians, Bohemians, Swiss, and others in the middle of Europe all spoke and wrote German made the issues regarding Germanness of nationality and of literary identity extraordinarily tricky. In this essay, in 1948, Torberg situates his own writing, his own poetic and intellectual and existential identity, in language.

His home is in German, specifically in the kind of worldly Viennese, Austrian German “with all its slavic and Jewish and latinate influx” that characterizes all his novels and essays and journalistic pieces.

Hanging on to one’s home through language like this bothered those who had stayed on during the war, the “*Finsterlinge*”—dark ones—who had forced the others out and “taken away their homeland and their station.” These people on the dark side, the ones who would just as well have had the exiles dead as silent, were very much put off by the revitalized presence of absent German writers, who for them had become traitors, writing and publishing as they were in Tel Aviv, Shanghai, New York, Stockholm, Los Angeles, and Buenos Aires. After the war the writers who had stayed began seeking the privileged status of those who had left: the status of the immigrant. The immigrants had kept German literature alive, pure, unpoisoned by the venom of the Nazis and German-speaking fellow-travelers, and the world knew it. The readers and writers, in exile and in the Vaterland, in German and in translation, all knew who had carried on the most demanding traditions of German literature during the dark years: the immigrants. All of a sudden, then, those writers who had stayed, collaborators, needed to redefine themselves as “immigrants” in order to save their writerly souls. Hence the birth of the “internal emigrant,” *innere Emigration*, (beginning with “i” or “e” depending on who’s talking), and a host of other kinds of excuse-making by bystanders and facilitators of the National Socialist regime. Although the term was used hopefully on the left by Thomas Mann in 1938 and Leonard Feuchtwanger as early as 1933, and despite the fact that the work of Viktor Klemperer, for instance, demonstrates that a vibrant intellectual life could and did exist in private in Nazi Germany, those who claimed internal emigrant status for themselves after the war were almost universally trivial scribblers of volkish kitsch, escapists into metaphysical or religious lyric and fiction, if not actual intellectual perpetrators of nazified racist propaganda.

In the dialogue that follows, Torberg, who had escaped nazified Austria through France, Spain, and Portugal and ended up in the United States, where he wrote out the war before returning to Vienna in 1951, has two writers, one who had to leave and one who chose to stay, debate their reasons for doing what they did.