

The Fiction of Leonhard Frank: A Survey

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Although Leonhard Frank (1882-1961) is not well known nowadays, his works were widely read during his lifetime, and his major novels and short stories were quickly translated into most European languages, including Armenian, Bulgarian, and Lithuanian.¹ He was also awarded several prizes for his works. More than most writers, Frank draws his subject matter from his own life and from events of his time. His work can be divided roughly into three periods. In his early period, which lasts until about 1930, Frank's works are mostly socially critical and activist. In his middle period, from about 1930 to 1945, he becomes disillusioned with social change and focuses instead on more private matters, especially the erotic. In the last years of his life, Frank's works are again socially critical, though erotic themes still appear.

Frank's early novels *Die Räuberbande*, 1914 (*The Robberband*, 1928), for which he first became famous, and *Der Bürger*, 1924 (*A Middle-Class Man*, 1930), and the novella *Die Ursache*, 1915 (*The Cause of the Crime*, 1928) stress the conflict of the individual with society. They criticize the patriarchal society, especially the family, school, and the courts. In these works, the protagonists search for their own identity and usually fail because society does not allow them the freedom to be individuals.

In his autobiography *Links Wo das Herz ist*, 1952 (*Heart on the Left*, 1954), Frank tells why these themes preoccupied him. The conflict between the individual and fathers and teachers stems from his own experiences. It was, however, given a sharper focus by his contact with Schwabing. When Frank was in Munich between 1905 and 1910 to study painting, he became a member of Schwabing society, which at that time was the bohemian center of Germany. Here he got to know the psychoanalyst Otto Gross, the writers Franz Jung, Karl Otten, and Oskar Maria Graf, and the anarchist Erich Mühsam. Of these people, Otto Gross had the greatest impact on the development of Frank's ideas. Gross preached an ethic of anarchy and free love. He rejected the patriarchal society because he believed it was psychologically damaging. At an early age, according to Gross, children were inhibited by a tyrannical patriarchal family structure which prevented them from developing fully, leading to destructive complexes. Gross advocated the destruction of patriarchy which would be replaced by a matriarchal society in which everyone would be free.² From Gross, Frank also learned about Nietzsche and Freud, though like Gross, Frank rejects Freud's belief that libidinal experiences are the basis of psychological development, and stresses instead social experiences. Frank enthusiastically adopted Gross's ideas, and these can be seen in most of his works.

Frank's first novel *Die Räuberbande* is set, like most of his socially critical novels, in his native city of Würzburg.⁴ The time is around 1900. The novel deals with a group of children who make an abortive attempt to escape from

¹For a list of Frank's works in translation see: Martin Glaubrecht, *Studien zum Frühwerk Leonhard Franks* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1965), pp. 211-17.

²For a detailed account of Gross's thought see: Emanuel Hurwitz, *Otto Gross: Paradies-Sucher zwischen Freud und Jung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1979).

Wilhelmine society by forming a robber band, modeled on the novels of Karl May, the German author famous for his (somewhat exaggerated) novels of the American Wild West. The society in which the boys live is described as brutal and uncaring, especially in the family and the school.⁵ Only in the band can they find companionship and the freedom to be themselves. Eventually, most of the boys abandon their attempts to escape and adapt. One who refuses is Oldshatterhand.⁶ Because he is a more sensitive boy than the others, he suffers more from the repression at home and at school. This gives rise to stuttering, inferiority complexes, and death wishes.⁷ Even years later when he is an artist in Munich, his childhood experiences torment him until he commits suicide, ironically at the very moment when his artistic talents have been recognized.

The importance of childhood experiences for later behavior is stressed in *Die Ursache*. Even when he is thirty years old, Anton Seiler, the protagonist, still suffers unknowingly from humiliating school experiences which have left deep psychic scars. At the beginning of the novella, he is inexplicably driven to return home. The journey home is one of revelation; he begins to understand that the reasons for his inability to live normally lie in the past, in the humiliations he has suffered from his teacher Mager. Hoping to cure himself, he visits Mager to make him apologize. When he sees Mager mistreating another pupil, he kills him. Seiler likens his crime to a sudden earthquake—completely uncontrollable. After he is arrested and brought to trial, the jury refuses to accept Seiler's childhood experiences as a mitigating factor, and sentences him to death. In the last part of the novella, Frank graphically describes the cruelty of state execution.

The conflict of the individual and society is the main theme of *Der Bürger*. Unlike the protagonists of the earlier works who come from the lower class, Jürgen Kolbenreier comes from the upper middle class. Like the others, though, he too is repressed, in this instance by his father who is contemptuous of him. Jürgen vacillates between the need to adapt to a society which will afford him a comfortable life but will not allow him to be free, and the need to find his own identity. This conflict tears him apart, and he becomes so divorced from himself that he develops schizophrenia.

Following Gross closely, Frank, in these works, shows his conviction that the patriarchal society destroys people. Although Frank believes that the patriarchal society should be abolished, the conflict between the individual and society in his works rarely leads to revolution. Instead, the protagonists internalize the conflict, which damages them irreparably. The conflict between the need to adapt to society for fear of loneliness and the equally pressing need to find their identities destroys precisely the most talented and sensitive because they feel the conflict more acutely.

⁵Leonhard Frank, *Links wo das Herz ist* (Munich: Nymphenburger, 1952), p. 257. Frank says that the Café Stephanie where he used to meet Gross was his university.

⁶*Die Räuberbande*, *Das Ochsenfurter Männerquartett*, and *Die Jünger Jesu* are set entirely in Würzburg; *Von Drei Millionen Drei* is set partly in Würzburg.

⁷Frank depicts teachers negatively in several of his works. In *Links wo das Herz ist*, the teacher is called Dürr, in *Die Räuberbande* and *Die Ursache*, he is called Mager, and in *Die Jünger Jesu*, he is called Scharf. All are depicted as brutal and sadistic (Scharf is in fact a Nazi) and as their names imply (Dürr means dry or arid, and Mager means meager) they are incapable of really teaching.

⁸Oldshatterhand's real name is Michael Vierkant, a fictionalized Frank. Michael Vierkant appears also in *Deutsche Novelle*, *Michaels Rückkehr*, and is the protagonist in the autobiography *Links wo das Herz ist*. In his autobiography, Frank says that all his works are portraits of himself (p. 258).

⁹Frank also suffered from such problems because of the treatment he received at school.

Because he was a convinced pacifist, Frank spent World War I in Switzerland. While there, he published a collection of anti-war novellas called *Der Mensch ist Gut* 1917, ("Man is Good"), which was banned in Germany. In these novellas, Frank expresses his belief in the goodness of people. Society, however, with its arbitrary rules and regulations, distorts people's natural goodness. The theme of all the novellas is the brutal and senseless killing in World War I, carried out in the name of patriotism and the state. Frank sees the war as a logical result of the patriarchal society, in which from an early age people have been conditioned to obey, causing them to go to war unquestioningly. Frank posits an anarchistic ideal of society in which people will love each other, though he is vague about how such a society can come into existence.

During World War I, Frank became interested in Marxism through his friendship with the Spanish Socialist Alvarez del Vayo, who was later the foreign minister of the Spanish Republic. After the war, Frank was involved briefly in Communist circles in Berlin. In some of the works he wrote after reading Marx, economic conditions replace teachers, fathers, and judges as the cause of human misery. This is most evident in *Der Bürger* (1924), *Das Ochsenfurter Männerquartett*, 1927 (*The Singers*, 1932), and *Von Drei Millionen Drei*, 1932 (*Three of Three Millions*, 1936). Marxism gave Frank a sharper focus for his social criticism, yet these novels are not Marxist in the strict sense, since Frank is still concerned with the individual rather than class struggle. In *Der Bürger*, for example, Frank focuses on Jürgen's search for identity rather than on economic and political problems which remain in the background. Socialism affords Jürgen companionship and a meaning for life which he otherwise lacks.

A Würzburg suffering from the depression forms the background for *Das Ochsenfurter Männerquartett*. Frank shows sympathetically how men feel shame because they are unable to provide for their families, which is not, however, their fault but the fault of economic conditions beyond their control. The protagonists are former members of the robber band who join together again to form a quartet to earn some money. They have adapted to society and suffer passively, lamed by their conformity. The ideal of freedom they held as boys has long since vanished.

Von Drei Millionen Drei, set in the economic crisis of 1930, is an even sharper attack on capitalism. People are portrayed as helpless victims who have to struggle just to stay alive. The crisis is so severe that there appears no possible way to fight it. In South America, where the protagonists have fled in the vain hope of finding work, they join an uprising. They believe they are fighting on the rebel side, but because they do not understand Spanish, they are in fact fighting for the government. When the rebels win, they are deported. But the rebellion has changed nothing (an example of Frank's growing disillusionment with revolution, caused by the failure of the German revolution). Though Marxist in tone, these novels do not offer Marxist solutions, but focus instead on the suffering individual.

Many of Frank's short stories and novellas written during this period satirize the bourgeoisie. "Im letzten Wagen," (1925) ("In the Last Coach," 1935), for example, depicts the middle class as hypocritical and brutal. When the middle-class characters in the story first get into the train, they appear to be jovial and friendly. However, when the last coach becomes uncoupled and hurtles out of control down a steep track, their masks are stripped away, showing brutality and selfishness beneath. Once the danger has passed, they resume their masks as if nothing has happened, incapable of learning from their experience. The novella "Der Beamte," 1925 ("The Official," 1935) tells the story

of the official Höfer, who has accepted societal conventions unquestioningly and who leads a sterile existence. For twenty-two years his routine has never varied. He rises at the same time each day, dresses in the same order, drinks his tea, and goes to work. He is like a robot, mechanically going through the motions of living. When his alarm clock fails to ring one day, disrupting his carefully worked out routine, his whole world collapses. Late for work and criticized for the first time in twenty-two years, he becomes distraught, leaves his job, goes to a prostitute, and commits suicide. Many such characters are found in Frank's works. They are, what he calls, *Ich-Leichen*,⁸ people who are basically dead because they have adapted to society at the cost of their personalities.

After 1925, beginning with his story *Karl und Anna*, 1927 (*Carl and Anna*, 1929), but even more pronouncedly after 1930, Frank becomes disillusioned with the possibility of social change and focuses increasingly on the erotic. Since society cannot be changed, he believes that the only road to salvation lies in a love relationship with another person. This belief also stems from Gross, who stressed that sexual experiences could heal people from their complexes. Through love, Frank believes, people can break out of the loneliness that surrounds them.

Karl und Anna introduces a favorite theme of Frank, that of predestined love. As a prisoner of war, Karl learns from his friend Richard about his wife Anna, and falls in love with her, without ever having seen her. When he is released, he goes to her pretending to be her husband. Through his love for her, he is saved from his paralyzing loneliness. The fruitfulness of the relationship is symbolized by Anna's pregnancy. A similar, almost overpowering love is the theme of *Bruder und Schwester*, 1929 (*Brother and Sister*, 1930). After their marriage, Lydia and Konstantin discover that they are brother and sister, separated since childhood by the divorce of their parents. They finally accept incest as something natural and again, as in *Karl und Anna*, the birth of their child symbolizes a positive relationship. Frank believes that incest is natural: it is only society that considers it wrong. In both these works, love is strong enough to overcome societal prohibitions, the prohibition against adultery and the even stronger one against incest. Frank urges people to be true to their inner natures, to their feelings, rather than follow what he considered to be arbitrary rules of society.

The first novel of Frank's second exile, this time from Hitler, *Traumgefährten*, 1936 (*Dream Mates*, 1946) also deals with love, but here the focus is on the divorce between physical and spiritual love. Guido and Maria have been driven mad because of their horror of sexuality, brought about (still typical of Frank's fiction) by childhood experiences. Their love is ill-fated, and Guido kills Maria and then himself. Predestined love also plays an important part in the novel. After the protagonist, Eve, meets Dr. Weber, whilst visiting her relative Maria at his sanatorium, she believes in her unconscious that he is predestined for her, and constructs a relationship with him in her dreams which becomes so vivid that she cannot separate dream from reality. Her dreams are, however, marred by her fear of sexuality, caused by a brutal home life and an unhappy previous marriage. Weber, the enlightened psychoanalyst, cures Eve's problems, and they marry. As in many of Frank's works, he stresses again the healing nature of love.

Frank also deals with pathological aspects of love, as in *Deutsche Novelle* (1954), published first in English as *The Baroness* (1950). The baroness Josepha had been forced to repress her sexuality because her family was poor yet

⁸Leonhard Frank, *Der Bürger* (Berlin: Sieben Stäbe Verlag, 1929), p. 162. Martin Glaubrecht uses the term *Ich-Leiche* to describe all those characters in Frank's works who have adapted at the expense of their identities.

required her to marry only someone of noble birth. Their poverty had, however, discouraged suitors. Josepha's repressed sexuality turns into perverse longings for humiliation and violation which reveal themselves in her dreams. She tries vainly to conquer these feelings but eventually succumbs to her bestial servant and kills him and then herself in order to preserve her identity. Because her sexuality is distorted, she cannot love the young painter Michael Vierkant who loves her. Frank also intends this work to be symbolic of the German people under Hitler, to show the pathological nature of Germany's relationship with Hitler.⁹ Because this intended parallel is so divorced from actual events of the Hitler period, it is not effective.

Mathilde, 1948 (*Mathilde* 1948) describes the development of a young woman from childhood through her first love, early marriage, her subsequent disappointment in marriage and divorce, and then her real love for the Englishman Weston. Their love is idyllic, as is the setting. (A frequent notion in Frank's works is that people can develop only away from society, in nature.) The idyll is shattered by the outbreak of war, as Weston returns to England to join the Air Force. Mathilde waits six years for Weston to return, tormented by fears for his safety which break her down physically and mentally. After they are reunited, she slowly regains her health. Here again Frank stresses that life has meaning only in a love relationship. Unlike his earlier works, the social background in all these love novels is vague.

Frank's last works return to social criticism, though the theme of love is still present. In *Die Jünger Jesu*, 1949 ("The Disciples of Christ") Frank depicts the immediate postwar years in Würzburg.¹⁰ The disciples are a band of boys who try to alleviate the poverty of the postwar years by stealing from the rich to give to the poor. Two other stories are interwoven. The first describes the love between the American soldier Steve and Johanna, a love that is meant to symbolize the healing of the wounds between the two countries. Johanna, however, dies in giving birth to their child. The other story is of Ruth Freudenheim, a Jewish girl. During the war, Ruth had been forced to watch a Nazi mob, incited by the brutal *Zwischenzahl*, kill her parents. Her fate was to be sent to Auschwitz and then to a brothel for German soldiers. She returns to Würzburg in 1946, devastated by her experiences. Finding that her parents' murderer has not been brought to justice, she kills him. The jury frees her, recognizing the justice of her act (an example of Frank's belief in the goodness of the average person). By her relationship with the young doctor Martin, Ruth is gradually healed, but they have to leave Würzburg for rural Spessart to escape the hostility of the city. Society in this novel is characterized by its corruption: the justice system is still riddled with Nazis; anti-Semitism is still rife; and the people are still hostile to the victims of Nazi persecution. Most have learned little from the war. Yet there is hope. Unlike the robber band in Frank's first novel, the disciples here are active socially and in their small way try to help people. At the end of the novel, they join the Young Socialists.

Michaels Rückkehr, 1957 ("Michael's Return") tells the story of a prewar emigrant who returns home to Germany to kill the Nazi murderer of his sister. He is arrested and brought to trial, but unlike Ruth in *Die Jünger Jesu*, he is sentenced to life imprisonment. As in *Die Jünger Jesu*, justice is corrupt and Nazis

⁹See, Gustav Schröder, "Zwischen Resignation und Hoffnung: Zur Mittleren Schaffensperiode von Leonhard Frank," *Aufbau* 13 (1957), 252-54.

¹⁰When Frank visited his native city after his years of exile in the United States, his reception was chilly because many citizens were offended by the portrayal of Würzburg in this novel (*Links wo das Herz ist*, pp. 255-56).

still wield power. The last part of the book focuses, however, on the love relationship between Michael and Maria. In Michael, Maria recognizes her predestined mate. She gets permission to visit him in prison and they confess their love for each other. Moved by their plight and dissatisfied with his job, the director of the prison frees Michael, who goes with Maria to Lake Maggiore where they live an idyllic existence.

Throughout his writings, Frank is concerned with the individual and his relationship to society. Frank believes that people are basically good and that left to themselves this inherent goodness will flourish. Because of his concern for the individual, Frank hopes that his writing will have a direct impact on society and that it will help change society for the better. This activist emphasis is particularly true of his early and late works. In his middle period, Frank is too disillusioned to be activist. In his autobiography, Frank tells of his joy in discovering that his works have had some impact on society. Frank wrote the novellas in *Der Mensch ist gut* to attack war and was very pleased upon learning that when one of the novellas, "Der Vater" ("The Father") was read in Berlin during World War I, the audience left the hall to demonstrate for peace, putting into practice the end of the story with its revolutionary demonstration for peace.¹¹ Frank had a similar reaction when he learned that *Die Ursache* helped to abolish capital punishment in one of the Baltic States.¹²

Despite his hope of changing society, a basic pessimism pervades Frank's works. Although he states in his autobiography that he believes that Socialism will make the world a more decent place, in his novels he questions whether change really can happen. The disciples in *Die Jünger Jesu* join the Young Socialists, but their struggle seems to have no chance for success in a world where Nazis still wield power. Frank shows in fact that society has become even more repressive, since the fifty years that his novels span include also the Nazi years.

Some of Frank's works are undeservedly neglected today. While those that deal with love and the erotic, such as *Karl und Anna* and *Bruder und Schwester*, are often trite, full of clichés and sexual mysticism, his social works, such as *Die Räuberbande*, *Die Ursache*, and *Der Mensch ist gut* are more effective. Frank is at his best when he depicts suffering and alienated outsiders against a realistic background, and his social novels give a vivid picture of life in Germany in the Wilhelmine era, the depression, the Nazi period, and the post-World War II years.

¹¹*Links wo das Herz ist*, p. 99.

¹²*Links wo das Herz ist*, pp. 167-68. Frank does not specify which Baltic state.