In his classic study of modern German thought, The Disinherited Mind (1952), Erich Heller described his “unifying theme” as “the consciousness of life’s increasing depreciation” in the face of “the predominance of the prosaic,” of “experience so prosaic that its mere contemplation paralyzes the poetic imagination.” This concern with the effects of the prosaic on the life of the imagination also stands at the center of the present work.

Indeed, readers acquainted with Professor Heller’s work will find themselves on familiar territory in this latest collection of essays. He displays his accustomed urbanity and fluent erudition throughout the text, illuminating both the individual authors and the larger issues he discusses. Many characters who were featured in his earlier volumes—Goethe, Nietzsche, Rilke, Kafka, Mann, and Karl Kraus, among others—return to prominent roles here, though three of the fourteen essays that compose the book are devoted to somewhat less eminent newcomers: the Norwegian novelist and 1920 Nobel laureate Knut Hamsun; Theodor Fontane, who is generally considered Germany’s first modern realist novelist; and the immensely popular cartoonist and satiric versifier Wilhelm Busch (1832-1908), author of Max und Moritz and other classics of the
Heller’s reflections on the predominance of prose prominently include reflections on the fate of language and learning in the age of prose. Especially in “The Broken Tradition,” in “Literature and Political Responsibility: apropos the letters of Thomas Mann,” and in his essay on Karl Kraus we find him speaking with the concerned voice of the humanist and pedagogue, lamenting the current dismal state of literary studies and lobbying for the preservation of traditional standards of language use and interpretation. For, to put it somewhat paradoxically, the triumph of prosaic reality shows itself nowhere more clearly than in the decay of prose. And disturbances in the life of language, Heller notes, reflect disturbances in the life of culture generally. Thus part of the battle against the predominance of prose is the stewardship of the language tradition bequeaths us. “[L]anguage,” he writes, “preserves the tradition of all speech, poetry and thought. We have not acquired it as one acquires an article of daily use, but have inherited it with the inescapable commitment to hand it on to the next generations. Language is common property like the soil and the air; and how we treat it increases, reduces, or corrupts the inheritance.”

But like The Disinherited Mind and The Artist’s Journey into the Interior (1965), In the Age of Prose dwells on nineteenth- and twentieth-century German literature and philosophy primarily in order to plumb the uncertain and often anguished vocation of art and literature in the modern age. Of course this troubled vocation is legible not only in the German tradition. Wallace Stevens, for example, gave it eloquent expression in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction”:

From this the poem springs: that we live in a place
That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves
And hard it is in spite of blazoned days.

The imagination’s response to the assaults of modernity—to the pervasive sense of meaninglessness and loss of place despite staggering material progress, to the splintering of inherited values and traditional habits of thought: such is Heller’s real theme in this book. The organizing metaphor he chooses for these typically modern assaults is “prose.” “I have called the volume ‘In the Age of Prose,’” he writes in his preface, “because all its chapters are concerned, in one way or another, with the fate of art, literature and thought in an epoch that is dominated by prose.” And as he observes in his title essay, “The Poet in the Age of Prose: Reflections on Hegel’s Aesthetics and Rilke’s Duino Elegies” “prose” tokens “not merely a manner of writing, but a style of comprehension, . . . prose is our psychology, our economics, our sociology—all our efforts intelligently to grasp the nature of the world.”

This expanded conception of prose and the prosaic has its origin in Hegel’s distinction, put forth in the Lectures on Aesthetics, between the bygone “age of poetry” and the modern age, the age of prose, an age whose view of reality is essentially determined by reason. For Hegel, art in its highest sense is to be understood not as an elevated form of entertainment but as “the sensuous
manifestation of truth.” Yet art in this highest sense now lies behind us. The modern conception of reality, grounded firmly in scientific rationality, has rendered art’s claim to truth otiose. Art’s very sensuousness excludes it from truth in a world where truth is understood to be fundamentally beyond the reach of the senses. In Heller’s words, the imagination, inextricably tied to the sensible, has been “devalued in the economy of man’s faculties. Our sense of truth forbids us still to take seriously the imaginative play” of art.

Hence art in the age of prose is no longer able to answer man’s deepest spiritual and intellectual needs. It becomes a kind of decoration or filigree, embroidering—or evading—a reality it can no longer reveal. “We are above the level at which works of art can be venerated as divine, and actually worshipped,” Hegel writes, with some nostalgia;

art no longer affords that satisfaction of spiritual wants which earlier epochs and peoples sought in them . . . . The beautiful days of Greek art and the golden time of the later Middle Ages are gone by. The reflective culture of our life today makes [their passing] a necessity for us . . . . From the point of view of its highest destiny, art is and remains for us a thing of the past.

In Hegel’s view this development is the necessary consequence of man’s freedom and rational nature. It is man’s spiritual coming of age that inaugurates the age of prose. The triumph of reason thus culminates in the death of art.

As in earlier works, Heller’s meditations here take place in the space between the stringent diagnosis of Hegel’s Lectures on Aesthetics and the Dionysian speculations of Nietzsche, who championed art as an antidote to the tyranny of scientific rationality. (“Only as an aesthetic phenomenon,” Nietzsche wrote in The Birth of Tragedy, “is life and the world eternally justified.”) Like Heidegger in the epilogue to “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heller acknowledges the force of Hegel’s argument but is reluctant to concede its inevitability. For if the modern conception of truth radically diminishes the competence of art, it also radically diminishes the stature of man. Perhaps it was his reflection on this diminishment that led Nietzsche, in The Will to Power, to declare that “We possess art lest we perish from the truth.”

In any case, this aspect of our rationalist legacy puts an enormous burden on any art that still aspires to be more than an elevated form of entertainment. Now, writes Heller, “the poet has to produce out of his own inner self, not only the poetry, but also, as it were, the climate, the temperature in which it can breathe.” It is one of the main tasks of In the Age of Prose to explore modern art’s more strenuous efforts to salvage some remnant of spiritual vitality in an age dominated by the prose of rationality. Heller thus gives detailed consideration to Rilke’s poetry of withdrawal in the Duino Elegies, to Mann’s reflections on art and the demonic in Doctor Faustus, and to Heidegger’s efforts to retrieve the “essence of poetry” from the prosaic clutter of modern rationality.

It is one of Heller’s greatest virtues as a critic that his sympathy for art’s rebellion against the prosaic is tempered by his recognition of the dangers of that rebellion. Thus, despite his great
admiration for Rilke’s poetry, he criticizes the extreme, almost ascetic inwardness that Rilke’s passion for spiritual purity engendered, a passion that bordered on world rejection. “Nowhere,” we read in the seventh Duino Elegy, “will the world exist but within.” Similarly, though deeply indebted to Nietzsche’s later reflections on art, Heller refuses to acquiesce in what he considers Nietzsche’s willful jettisoning of truth for the sake of art’s beautiful illusions. Both writers claim that their meditations, however somber or—in the case of Rilke—otherworldly, result in a gesture of affirmation or praise. But, picking up a point he had made in The Disinherited Mind, Heller takes them both to task for promulgating a view of art as “intransitive” affirmation, a swooning “Yes!” that lacks any ground or definite object. “Rühmen, das ist’s!”—“Praising, that’s it!” Rilke exclaims in the Sonnets to Orpheus. But precisely what is being praised? And precisely what is Nietzsche affirming when he excitedly proposes art’s “affirmative” character as a “countermovement” to nihilism? “[I]t is probably due to Nietzsche and Rilke,” Heller writes in “Nietzsche’s Last Words About Art and Truth,”

that the language of poets has become accustomed to the—as it were—intransitive use of such verbs as “affirm” or “praise.” This is more than a matter of grammar: grammar, as it often does, mirrors here the grammar of consciousness itself. It is impossible to make articulate sense, and not merely an ecstatic-intoxicated dithyramb, of the praiseworthiness of praise itself; or simply to affirm affirmation.

Students of Nietzsche may object that Heller underestimates Nietzsche’s continuing struggle with the problem of truth and his growing insistence on the importance of honesty (“the youngest among the virtues,” as he put it in Zarathustra). The later Nietzsche, after all, sought to distance himself from the Wagnerian Romanticism of The Birth of Tragedy and extolled a more sober, classical view of art. But Heller’s concern is well founded. The intransigence of prosaic reality often spawns an extravagant, escapist art. “Beheld with the eyes of art,” Heller notes, “the world appears sub specie necessitatis” under the aspect of necessity, and as such it promises respite from the contingency and meaninglessness that saturates everyday, prosaic life. But the price of that respite is high. For our world is not the pristine, necessary world of art, where everything is arranged according to the artist’s vision, but a messy world of possibility and choice in which expectation is continually chagrined by novelty. In taking a step beyond the diminished reality of the age of prose, art threatens to step outside empirical reality tout court.

There are two main strategies that art can adopt in its campaign against the dominance of prose: it can attempt to circumvent reality, replacing it with aesthetic constructions; or it can turn inward, seeking a “deeper” reality through the cultivation of the spontaneous, the immediate, the irrational. The first signals the triumph of freedom in the willful aestheticizing of the world; the second signals the denial of freedom and self-consciousness in the service of irrational “life.” Both evade the exigencies of empirical, prosaic reality.

Surely one of the most stunning evocations of the first option, the ambition to transform everyday life by aestheticizing it, occurs in Hermann Hesse’s novel The Glass Bead Game. In his introduction to the book, Hesse provides an outline of the rudiments of the Game that might serve equally well
to describe certain contemporary schools of art and criticism. “The Glass Bead Game,” Hesse writes,

is a mode of playing with the total contents and values of our culture; it plays with them as, say, in the great age of the arts a painter might have played with the colors on his palette. All the insights, noble thoughts, and works of art that the human race has produced in its creative eras, all that subsequent periods of scholarly study have reduced to concepts and converted into intellectual property — on all this immense body of intellectual values the Glass Bead Game player plays like the organist on an organ . . . . A Game, for example, might start from a given astronomical configuration, or from the actual theme of a Bach fugue, or from a sentence out of Leibniz or the Upanishads, and from this theme, depending on the intentions and the talents of the player, it could either further explore and elaborate the initial motif or else enrich its expressiveness by allusions to kindred concepts.

Though Heller does not discuss *The Glass Bead Game*, he clearly recognizes the phenomenon that Hesse describes. Thus he deals at length with Adrian Leverkuhn’s reflection on art in *Doctor Faustus*. “Art would like to stop being pretense and play,” Leverkuhn tells his friend Serenus Zeitblom; “it would like to become knowledge.” In the art Leverkuhn envisions, Heller observes, “[t]echnique sets itself up as art’s alpha and omega” with the “stealthy expectation that technical perfection may yield something like meaning, even if this meaning is not much more than the critique of art, the kind of critique that strains to become an art in its own right.”

Heller’s touches on the second option — the cult of spontaneity — in his essay “The Dismantling of a Marionette Theatre; or, Psychology and the Misinterpretation of Literature.” This essay brings together the other side of art’s challenge to the predominance of the prosaic with Heller’s concern for the proper use of language and responsible interpretation. Heinrich von Kleist’s “On the Marionette Theater” is a classic production of the German Romantic spirit, crystallizing in a few pages its obsession with the connection between self-consciousness, spontaneity, and artistic creativity.

The essay takes the form of a dialogue between a narrator and a dancer of the city’s ballet. Having often observed the dancer at performances of the marionette theater, the narrator asks why a dancer, so skilled in the art of movement, should be drawn to watch the mechanical feats of a puppet. The dancer explains that he is fascinated by the peculiar grace and expressiveness that come from the puppet’s utter lack of self-consciousness; for lacking self-consciousness, the movements of the puppet also lack affectation. Self-consciousness corrupts spontaneity, blocking the free expression of the spirit. Thus, though he is an excellent fencer, the dancer explains, he was unable to make a single hit against a pet bear he engaged at the house of a friend. The animal’s intuitive perception, unclouded by self-consciousness, gave him a supreme advantage over all the dancer’s acquired skill.

By way of biographical background, Heller notes that Kleist speaks of suffering from an “intimate” physical affliction. We do not know what the nature of the affliction was, according to Heller, but since it appears to have been alleviated by simple surgery, he conjectures that it was
nothing more than phimosis and the surgery circumcision. In its meditation on the relation between spontaneity, the unconscious, and artistic creativity, Kleist’s piece on the marionette theater stands as one of the charter documents of what Geoffrey Hartman has aptly termed the Romantic project of “anti-self-consciousness.” Heller outlines the plot and significance of Kleist’s essay, but does so mostly to set the stage for a contemporary interpretation of the piece that he wishes to share with us. In what might have been a beginner’s etude for the Glass Bead Game, an author in a respected psychoanalytic journal opines that Kleist’s intimate physical problem was

probably the deepest source of his preoccupation with mind-body fragmentation, paralysis of function, and loss of grace and beauty. The portrait of a fencer suddenly incapable of “thrusting” is a thinly disguised fear of sexual impotence. Kleist’s depiction of the puppet’s legs as “nothing but pendula,” his notion of a dancer who has his “soul” in his “elbow,” and the portrait of an adolescent suddenly unable to move his leg into a desired position all express symbolically the situation of sexual impotence. (The image of a dancer with his soul in the “small of his back” in addition suggests a feminine sexual identification and anal penetration fantasies.) All suggest a sexualized hyper-awareness, a feeling of deadness in, and lack of control over, a body part which is not fully integrated with the self . . .

Charity requires that the author of this effusion remain anonymous. As Heller remarks, the piece is its own best self-parody. Yet it admirably captures the hermeneutical hubris that the corruption of language abets.

The thoughtful essays in this volume amply attest to the dominance of prose in all its manifestations. Such dominance is the ineluctable given, the terminus a quo of the modern spirit. But by witnessing that spirit’s eloquent oppositions, Heller reminds us that victory over the prosaic sometimes consists simply in the tenacity, the passion, of continued struggle.

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