PÜCKLER AND GERMAN TRAVEL LITERATURE

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Reiseziel England—Destination England—is the title Tilman Fischer gave his large-scale survey of the “poetics of travel description” and modernism. In that study, Pückler takes his place alongside Heinrich Heine and Theodor Fontane, but he also finds himself in close company with Fanny Lewald, Ida Gräfin Hahn-Hahn, and Georg Weerth as well as numerous authors unknown today who provided the German reading public with reports on England between 1830 and 1870. The reason for this grouping is Fischer’s interest in assessing individual works for their contribution to the genre of travel literature. This approach has certain advantages: it provides the first comprehensive, textually based analysis of the constituents of travel description and shows the restricted range of subjects and modes of presentation that form the topical resources of this genre. However, it also has disadvantages: it necessarily qualifies the often very different status of the texts—travel handbooks are considered alongside literary descriptions, for example—and thus marginalizes the obvious special qualities of many works.

That holds in particular for Pückler’s Briefe eines Verstorbenen (“letters of a dead man”) since they are not simply a “contribution to the genre” but were rather epoch-making for the genre in Germany. Pückler’s Briefe had a tremendous influence on the development of travel description in Germany during the first half of the nineteenth-century, as the large number of reviews proves.

What the Briefe do not provide and are not meant to provide is a comprehensive account of the process of industrial and political modernization, which England was seen as exemplifying in both a positive and a negative sense. Like politics, industrialization, as Pückler tells his readers “c’est pas mon métier.” It is certain, though, that he visited modern factories during his travels in Britain. When Pückler deigns to discuss industry in the Briefe, he takes the term “industrial landscape” seriously and incorporates industry into the picturesque genre:

The area remains the same; rich, darkly wooded and meadow-green, here enlivened in many places by blast furnaces, tin and ironworks whose fires play in yellow, red, blue and greenish colours, and blaze from tower-high chimneys, where they sometimes assume the shape of large glowing flowers when the flames and smoke, forced down by the atmosphere, rest for a long time in a dense, unmoving mass.
Pückler’s England, which included Wales and Ireland, is less the England of “mechanical than [of] poetic time,” as he explains. It is Walter Scott’s England, not James Watt’s. “With Walter Scott’s attractive book in hand, I entered the ruins which conjure up so many different feelings,” he writes of the remains of Kenilworth Castle, the setting for Scott’s novel
Kenilworth. And only a few pages later, Pückler invokes Scott in describing a famous garden:

As is known, Blenheim was laid out largely in the same location as the ancient royal park of Woodstock stood (you will remember it from Walter Scott’s latest novel [Woodstock, or the Cavalier]), and a large part of the oak forest still exists from the days of the unhappy Rosamond, always turning green, dying only slowly in an agony lasting a hundred years.

The situation is much the same for Pückler in Ireland: “The ‘Rock of Cashel’ with its famous and magnificent ruins is one of the greatest ‘lions’ of Ireland, and together with Holycross [sic] Abbey it was recommended to me by Walter Scott himself as being the most worthwhile seeing in Ireland.”

No artist is mentioned more frequently in the Briefe than Scott, not even Shakespeare. Scott is Pückler’s English Cicerone; his works are the vade mecum that guides Pückler’s art of description. The model for Pückler’s manner of writing, as he himself admitted, was Heine’s Reisebilder (Travel Pictures). What he did not want to be, as he makes clear through his masterly imitation of a different manner of writing, was a “professional describer of journeys” (Reisbeschreiber von Profession). Recounting his visit to Caernarfon, the birthplace of the first prince of Wales and “one of the most beautiful ruins in England,” Pückler writes:

The tower in which the prince was born is called the Eagle Tower . . . however, this name is not associated with him but with the four colossal eagles enthroned on the spire, of which only one still exists today. He is considered to be a Roman, for Caernarfon stands on the site of the ancient Segontium, which . . . but I am going too far and was well on the way to falling into the language of the professional describer of journeys who believes he is allowed to bore when he instructs—although he has usually found the material for his instruction himself through the laborious reading of local books. Je n’ai pas cette prétention, vous le savez, je laisse errer ma plume, in a carefree manner, wherever it leads me.

Of course, the “freely wandering pen” also describes a manner of writing, a poetic manner of writing living on the individual or surprising idea that
contrasts with the pretension of merely borrowed knowledge. But it was, rather, Pückler’s tone that made his Briefe a success with those who had an ear for such things. In May 1870, Fontane wrote to his wife, who was staying in London: “Your last, detailed letter was a great joy to me and I thank you most gratefully for it. The greatest praise I can give you is that I read it like Pückler’s letters . . .” \(^{17}\) Almost two decades later, in 1888, Fontane commented on another princely writer, Wilhelm Malte Prince of Putbus, and his account of Queen Victoria’s coronation in 1838. The prince’s reports, Fontane wrote, were “‘extremely finely’ and in a tone of an aristocratic lack of inhibition which reminds one everywhere of Prince Pückler and not infrequently achieves this same tone. Everything is written freely, boldly, stylishly and bursting with anecdotal experiences.” \(^{18}\)

It was precisely Pückler’s aristocratic tone that Ludwig Börne strongly criticized immediately after the publication of the first two parts of the Briefe. Börne regarded travel literature as a middle-class preserve and claimed it for himself and his writer colleagues as a “medium of sharp social criticism and political education.” \(^{19}\) To Börne, the prince must have seemed a snobbish interloper who had to be forced out of the broad cultural sphere appropriated by the middle class:

But we must keep a watchful eye on him as on all aristocratic writers. Not so that they do not take anything with them that does not belong to them (what is there to take from us anyway?), but so that they don’t leave anything there that doesn’t belong to us—no arrogance, no aristocratic pride. . . . Remove him from the catalogue! Arrogance must remain in manuscript and must not be printed. \(^{20}\)

Willibald Alexis also regarded the prince as an exceptional case—“a noble man in literature” (ein vornehmer Mann in der Literatur) \(^{21}\)—and distinguishes clearly between “him” and “us”:

Not everyone who, coming from the bonne société \(^{22}\) of high life, makes an excursion into literature, consequently also finds that he is in our ‘good society’. We are well-behaved in the face of such condescension, but only in the way that in the old salons one is polite to the novus homo. He is not one of us, people quietly say. . . . We literary people simply also have our own good society; but since our salons have a much larger public we have to be careful. \(^{23}\)

Pückler’s special place is once again confirmed in this reproach of the aristocracy. In 1838, looking back at the debate over the Briefe, Karl Au-
Gust Varnhagen von Ense wrote: “one believed that one had to save literature from a dangerous aristocratic invasion and supremacy.” Even Pückler’s manner of his traveling, with his own coach and sometimes accompanied by his servants, set him apart from most other travelers. That made Theodor Mundt see him as a “born travel genius” who hides in the coach, where hills and valleys and human life flit by in objective window images and from a comfortable perspective. . . . In the coach he is comfortably ensconced, and has developed the coziness of the to-ing and fro-ing in the world, the poetry of the life on the road and at the inns into the highest system of wisdom and beauty.

It is clear that this pleasant and comfortable perception in motion—which, by the way, was originated by William Gilpin—created different images and pictures of the landscape than the bumping and jolting common travelers usually had to endure.

Many reviewers recognized the individuality in Pückler’s travel accounts, the versatile, sophisticated spirit at work in his observations, judgments, and descriptions. They admired his talent and intellectual disposition, which rested on self-knowledge and knowledge of others. It is part of the “subjective” gesture of this individuality that it claims in advance the right to offend consciously against the genre’s convention that obliges an author to be truthful and objective. In the Briefe, Pückler announces that “here and there” he mixes “poetry (more modestly: fiction) with truth.” And, again running counter to the conventions of the genre, he fights to exercise his right of detailed psychological self-reflection. He directs the reader’s attention to his “character,” which, as he permits the fictitious editor to note, will arouse the reader’s interest because he expresses “unbiased judgements about himself.”

The epistolary form common in travel literature suited Pückler very well, but here, too, he departs from usual practice. His travel letters are based on actual correspondence; in the case of many other authors, it is open to doubt whether their “letters” had ever been sent. The dialogue between the writer and recipient of the letters permits a form of self-discussion, as does Pückler’s habit of addressing the reader, which permits the latter to participate directly in what the author has experienced. This acts, in turn, as a guarantee of authenticity even though some of what Pückler recounts, as noted above, is invention. Authenticity is reinforced by subjectivity: Pückler says he restricts himself to writing about “what interests me most” (“was mich am meisten anspricht”) and thereby largely excludes what he has not seen or observed or experienced himself. As a result, the reader should not expect “a statistical handbook,
a topography, a regular listing of all the so-called sites of London, or a systematic paper on England.”

What distinguishes Pückler’s Briefe more decisively from the mass of travel literature, however, is the art of realization, the creation of an illusion of immediacy. In his review of the Briefe, Goethe had high praise for this aspect of Pückler’s writing:

One cannot but think that he had the objects immediately in front of his eyes, that he interpreted them with his pen; and, however carefully he may have kept his diary in letter form each evening, such clear, detailed description is nonetheless rare.

Achieving this directness required clever guidance of the reader’s imagination. That is why Pückler made himself a “tireless guide in the realm of the imagination” (“unermüdlichen Führer im Reich der Einbildungskraft”) for the recipient of his letters (and, indirectly, the reader of the published correspondence).

Reading creates the illusion of traveling: the reader participates in the traveler’s experiences and sees the same images the traveler saw. One of the most effective descriptive techniques, which Pückler uses masterfully, is the imaginative placing of the reader within a particular sphere of experience. The author addresses the reader as if he were present and opens his eyes by guiding his attention. Step by step, the author gives a series of visual signals that close the distance separating the reader from the scene and leads the reader to the object under observation. To create an impression of the whole, he offers the reader an array of images and comparisons and then walks him through the circle of visual impressions surrounding him.

How Pückler uses and modifies this technique when describing parks and landscapes is the subject of an article I recently wrote on his “art of description.” As an exception, I would like to quote myself:

If Pückler has called Capability Brown the ‘Garden Shakespeare of England,’ . . . then he himself may be seen as Germany’s ‘Garden Scott’. It is time to discover the ‘Master of Description’ so that the criticism of garden art may again attain the highest standing and public impact through model and example. A first step might already be taken, if in the study of landscape architecture one only heeded more the old concept: ‘Words, when well chosen, have so great a Force in them, that a Description often gives us more lively Ideas than the Sight of Things themselves.’

Journey’s like Pückler’s were still the privilege of the happy few, and we must bear in mind that travel accounts like the Briefe served most mem-
bers of the reading public not as guides but as a substitute for travel. Authors who took account of this fact had to try to turn the reader into a traveling companion—to turn the non-traveler into a participating observer. That was achieved by what could be called the literary art of illusion, an art that in many ways overlapped with the art of illusion in optical media such as the panorama and the diorama. Pückler himself had seen panoramas portraying Rio de Janeiro, Madrid, and Geneva in the course of his travels, and he also reported his pleasure in seeing “the view of a very beautiful panorama of London.”

I hope this sketch has made clear how and why Pückler’s Briefe were “epoch-making” in the history of German travel literature. I use the word “epoch” because the tremendous success of the Briefe might have encouraged other authors to imitate him or to undertake critical journeys in his footsteps. Pückler’s claim that he had earned more with his Briefe than Goethe had from all his works may have been an exaggeration. Still, the Briefe were a best seller, and Pückler clearly earned several tens of thousands of thalers with them. Leaving the example of Pückler’s commercial success aside, the importance of Pückler’s travels as a source of stimuli for his theory and practice of landscape gardening cannot be overstated. Moreover, in contrast to the mass of German travel literature on England, the Briefe provide a veritable gallery of views of parks, gardens, and landscapes. Given the lack of professional criticism of garden art and landscape architecture today, we can still learn from Pückler’s Briefe.

America, to turn in closing to the subject of this collection, has a marginal but not unimportant position in Pückler’s Briefe. After reading Washington Irving’s The Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus, Pückler writes in his forty-third letter:

We are extremely grateful to this intellectually stimulating American . . . for this story. It is a beautiful tribute paid to the great seafarer from the country which he gave to the civilized world and which certainly appears to be the last stage which the cycle of human perfectibility passes through.

Sentences like this remind us that, for all his Romantic posturing, Pückler does not reject the idea of progress. He assumed, by the way, that England would in the near future pass the zenith of its development. More remarkably, Pückler relates an American success story that reads like his own personal vision of utopia. The story of a “famous queer bird” (berühmter Sonderling), an unnamed Colonel C., was told to Pückler by the writer Lady Sidney Morgan, who became known above all for her
novel *The Wild Irish Girl*. One should therefore not take every word too seriously. As Pückler relays the story:

‘The elegant, elderly man you see over there,’ she said, ‘was one of the most successful dandies of the capital even during my youth. However, after he had wasted his fortune in this way until only a few thousand pounds remained, one day his fate guided him so that he was standing in front of a map of America, and suddenly he had the thought of becoming a settler there.’

Didn’t Pückler also have this idea? His account continues:

‘On the map he immediately chooses a spot on Lake Erie, sells his remaining possessions in the same week, has his servant marry a pretty young girl, sets sail with the two of them and arrives happily at the chosen spot in the middle of the primeval forest, lives for a few days by hunting, sleeps in the open, within a few days and with the help of some other settlers constructs a log cabin in which he still lives, soon achieves a significant influence on the other adventurers round about, which he uses in order to encourage them to carry out work together, and to whom he proves very useful by cooking and roasting for them. This replaces the semi-raw food which they otherwise had to enjoy.’

Pückler would certainly have agreed with this division of labor. Finally, there is even mention of a “small principality” (“kleines Fürstentum”), which provides support for an existence in the forest, and sometimes for the existence of a man of the world:

[He] loves and is fruitful, finally sees a new generation develop there which is entirely dependent on him. He now possesses a small principality by extending his lands, calculates his revenues as being 10,000 pounds sterling annually, and regularly every ten years comes to England for one season, where he, as previously, lives fashionably with the ease of a man of the world, and then returns to the woods again for another ten years, once again exchanging the modern tailcoat for the sheepskin.49

A life that was a cross between Fenimore Cooper50 and Beau Brummel51—that might have been Pückler’s ideal. And perhaps that is why he tells this story from America.

**Notes**


3 T. Fischer, Reiseziel, 16.


6 Pückler, Briefe, 508–09, 651, 656, 706.

7 Ibid., 540; see also 539, 550, 577–78, 760–62, 764.


9 Pückler, Briefe, 320; see also 759.

10 Ibid., 538.

11 Ibid., 554.

12 Ibid., 227.

13 Ibid., 13, 23, 45, 107, 137, 227, 283, 416, 496, 508, 530, 538, 554, 600, 601, 656, 695, 739, 776, 782, 801, 831.


15 Pückler, Briefe, xiii (introduction); see Hartmut Steinecke, “‘Reisende waren wir beide’: Pückler-Muskau und Heine: Aspekte der Reiseliteratur vor der Julirevolution,” in H. Stei-

16 Pückler, Briefe, 44–45.


19 T. Fischer, Reiseziel, 90.


22 See Pückler, Briefe, 19.


26 For example, see Pückler, Briefe, 11.

27 See Raymond Immerwahr, Romantisch: Genese und Tradition einer Denkform (Frankfurt/Main 1972), 33–34.


29 See T. Fischer, Reiseziel, 204–06.

30 “... hier und da Dichtung (bescheidener: Fiktion) mit Wahrheit zu vermischen”: Pückler, Briefe, 405.

31 Ibid., 273 annotation.


33 “Poetry and truth is my motto (Dichtung und Wahrheit ist meine Devise)”: Pückler, Briefe, 179.

34 See T. Fischer, Reiseziel, 246; Pückler, Briefe, 145, 466.

35 Pückler, Briefe, 505.

36 Goethe, “Briefe,” 469.

37 Pückler, Briefe, 547.

38 Ibid., 527–29; see also ibid., 545–49.

39 Hubertus Fischer, “The Art of Description—Park and Landscape in Pückler’s ‘Briefe eines Verstorbenen’,” in Michael Rohde and Rainer Schomann, eds., Historic Gardens Today: To commemorate the 80th birthday of Professor Dr. Dieter Hennebo (Leipzig, 2004), 45.

40 See T. Fischer, Reiseziel, 233.

41 In general, see Sehsucht: Das Panorama als Massenunterhaltung des 19. Jahrhunderts, ed. Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland GmbH (Basel and Frank-
furt/Main, 1993); Stephan Oettermann, *Das Panorama: Die Geschichte eines Massenmediums* (Frankfurt/Main, 1980).


43 Ibid., 699; see also 604.


45 He identifies, however, America with freedom and the American with the free man; see Pückler, *Briefe*, 391, 414.

46 Ibid., 302.

47 See ibid., 59, 297.

48 See ibid., 219, 550.

49 Ibid., 813–14.

50 See his novel *The Pioneers* (1823).

1: The Tumulus, Pückler’s burial place in his park in Branitz. Photo: Sonja Duempelmann.
2: The Long Meadow in Prospect Park, Brooklyn. Photo: Sonja Duempelmann.

3: A meadow in Muskau Park. Photo: Elizabeth Barlow Rogers.
4: Richmond Hill. Photo: Cord Panning, Stiftung Fürst-Pückler-Park Bad Muskau.

5: Design for a castle by Karl Friedrich Schinkel. Courtesy town of Bad Muskau.
6: View from the eastern side of the park toward the park: (a) as envisioned in 1834 (Collection of the town of Bad Muskau); (b) in 1989 (photo: Ekkehard Brucksch, Stiftung Fürst-Pückler-Park Bad Muskau); (c) in 2005 (photo: Astrid Roscher, Stiftung Fürst-Pückler-Park Bad Muskau).
7: Flower garden in Muskau Park. Photo: Astrid Roscher, Stiftung Fürst-Pückler-Park Bad Muskau.
10: “Graves are the mountain tops of a remote new world,” inscription in the railing atop the land pyramid in Pückler’s park at Branitz. Photo: Gert Groening.