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## Promises and False Hopes: Poetic Prose and the Questionable Identities of the Narrator in Jean Paul Richter's "German Novels"

IN THE SECOND EDITION OF HIS treatise on poetics, *Vorschule der Ästhetik* (1813), Jean Paul Richter introduced a classification of narrative fiction based on his own works, and using analogies from the visual arts.<sup>1</sup> He called it "Der poetische Geist in den drei Schulen der Romanenmaterie, der italienischen, der deutschen und niederländischen" (The poetic spirit in the three schools of novelistic matter, the Italian, the German and the Dutch). By "matter" Richter meant both cultural content and style. Thus the Italian "school," like Italian paintings, idealizes and portrays conflicts and events in higher society, scenes of drama and tragedy, and of enthusiastic friendship and love; being the inveterate humorist, Richter could never do without comic and satirical interludes, but in his ultimate Italian novel *Titan*, even the humorist Schoppe meets with a tragic fate.

Likewise, the "Dutch" stories take place in villages, and their protagonists are "Käuze," odd characters with strange hobbies, typically teachers and Lutheran ministers, the prototype being the schoolmaster Wuz. Like genre paintings, these "low" Dutch stories are designed to evoke friendly smiles and laughter. The "German" stories, with no analogy in the arts, are located in the middle, socially

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Paul, *Vorschule der Ästhetik*, in *Werke*, 6 vols. (Munich: Hanser Verlag, 1963) 5:253-57; there is an excellent translation of the *Vorschule: Horn of Oberon. Jean Paul Richter's School for Aesthetics*, trans. with introduction by Margaret R. Hale (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1973).

and stylistically, and are meant to combine the prose of the real life in the German small towns with the poetry of higher aspirations, or in the words of the *Vorschule*, "daß er doch die bürgerliche Alltäglichkeit mit dem Abendrote des romantischen Himmel überziehe und blühend fürbe" (that the narrator would enhance the bourgeois everyday life with the evening glow of the romantic sky and colour it with flowers) (254–55).

The fable of the Italian novel is that of the "hidden prince," who grows up unaware of his identity and destiny, and who in the end comes to rule his country (one of the small German principalities) and turn it from a corrupt to a model society. In contrast, the protagonist of the German novel is the young man who has to fight his way through the miseries of bourgeois life, poverty, intrigues, legal troubles, greediness, and sheer malice; but he manages to preserve his moral innocence, integrity and his faith in the ideal world, of the future and the hereafter. In his *Vorschule*, a resigned Richter already signals the almost insurmountable difficulties for such a life and type of *bildungsroman*: "und wer es nicht einsehen will, setze sich nur hin und setze die Flegeljahre fort (and if you don't want to believe it, just sit down and complete the *Flegeljahre*) (255).

*Flegeljahre* (1804–05) is Richter's ultimate German novel that remained unfinished, at least in its plot. To understand Richter's problems with this novel, arguably his best and nearest in stature to his model *Tristram Shandy*, we have to consider Richter's two German novels and the relation of their protagonists to the narrator. In his first ("Italian") novel *Die unsichtbare Loge* (The Invisible Lodge) (1793), Jean Paul Richter, whose given name was Johann Paul Friedrich Richter, created the fictional stand-in "Jean Paul," in homage to Rousseau's narrative persona, Jean Jacques. This figure appears in all of the Dutch stories, and is present as a witness and narrator, mostly behind the scenes, in the Italian stories. When the novel *Hesperus* (1795) achieved an instant popularity and propelled a hitherto unknown writer into the limelight, readers and in particular women readers conflated the "real" author J.P.F. Richter with the "Jean Paul" of the fiction, and transformed the writer into a semi-fictional character who, together with his dog, became an object of avid fan adulation. Yet, as the milieu and stories of the German novels were closest to those of his own life, he hesitated to insert himself as Jean Paul into these novels, though the persona always figured at least on the margins.

In 1796, Richter published *Blumen-, Frucht- und Darnenstücke, oder Ehestand, Tod und Hochzeit des Armenadvokaten Firmian Stanilaus Siebenkäs im Reichsmarktflecken Kubschnappel* (Flower, Fruit and Thorn Pieces, or Married Life, Death, and Wedding of the Advocate for the Poor Firmian Stanislaus Siebenkäs in the Imperial Market Place of Kubschnappel), usually known as *Siebenkäs*. A young lawyer having just completed his studies, Siebenkäs is settling down in his home town and begins practicing as an advocate for the poor. He thinks that he can afford to marry and establish his household because there is an inheritance waiting for him, administered by his guardian, the Heimlicher von Blaise, one of the prominent citizens of this tiny "Free Imperial City" or, rather, "Marktflecken." But it is an illusion, a false hope. During his student days, Siebenkäs met someone who so closely resembling him that together they could be mistaken for twins. They decided to exchange names: Siebenkäs is in reality Leibgeber, and his friend Leibgeber is Siebenkäs. When identities become doubtful, bourgeois legalities are bound to frustrate. The Heimlicher refuses to turn over the money to a man with another name, although Siebenkäs had notified him of the name change at the time. The stage is set for a legal battle without end. The advocate of the poor is now poor himself and his only court case is his own, which goes from one challenge to the next, always in written briefs, never a day in court, the judges remaining unseen in a Kafkaesque manner.

Siebenkäs and Leibgeber are humorists; they have utter contempt for bourgeois conventions and false values, and they try to get laughter out of misery, even despair. Whereas Siebenkäs preserves his faith in God and human goodness despite his experiences, the nomadic Leibgeber has given up all hope for this or another world. Siebenkäs's married life is turning into "ein treues Dornenstück" (a true thorn piece) but the contrasting inserted set-piece "Blumenstück" is not very idyllic either. It is none other than "Die Rede des toten Christus vom Weltgebäude herab, daß kein Gott sei" (the sermon of the dead Christ from the top of the universe, that there is no God).<sup>2</sup> This sermon, however, is declared to be a dream, a nightmare, and the dreamer awakens in the morning

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<sup>2</sup> The final clause should not be read as stating "God is dead" almost a century before Nietzsche said it, but rather as saying there is no God and there never was.

and is relieved that he can believe in the existence of God, after all.<sup>3</sup> But Leibgeber does not awake from the bad dream of this life. No wonder that he reacts with sarcasm, satire, and dark humour. Siebenkäs, in his endless legal battles, sees that his marriage is falling apart. His wife Lenette does not understand the reason for their misery and does not approve of his dogged behaviour, which shocks the town folks. This makes him miserable, but he has hopes for a way out: he is writing a book of satires. This book will be called *Die Auswahl aus des Teufels Papieren* (The Selection from the Devil's Papers), a book that was actually published by Jean Paul Friedrich Richter in 1789, during a period of intense misery for him when he lived in starvation with his mother and brothers in the town of Hof. *Siebenkäs*, especially its revised version of 1816, draws heavily on the details of these years.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the narrator/author Jean Paul and Siebenkäs are writing the same text. After *Siebenkäs* had become popular, readers became curious about that other forgotten work, the *Teufels Papiere*, long out of print, and Richter obliged by inventing a new story where he, Jean Paul, was supposed to have collaborated with Siebenkäs and Leibgeber on new versions of satires from the *Teufels Papiere*. The new work was called *Palingenesien* (reincarnation or rebirth of old works).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The "Rede" was inserted by Germaine de Staël in her book *De l'Allemagne*, without the ending, and in this form it impressed the French Romanticists as well as those who read it in the first English translation. In his second essay on Richter, Thomas Carlyle tried to correct this version with his own complete translation. See my study, "Thomas Carlyles einzigartiger Held Jean Paul Friedrich Richter. Die Jean-Paul-Essays und ihre Bedeutung für die Rezeption Jean Pauls in England und Amerika." *Jahrbuch der Jean-Paul-Gesellschaft* 31 (1996): 141–64. For the French reception, see the book by Claude Pichois, *L'image de Jean Paul Richter dans les lettres françaises* (Paris: Corti, 1963).

<sup>4</sup> The most vivid description is given by Günter de Bruyn, *Das Leben des Jean Paul Friedrich Richter* (Halle/Saale: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 1975); see also my *Erfolglosigkeit. Zum Frühwerk Jean Pauls* (München: Wilhelm Fink, 1977). For a comparison of the two versions and the sources for *Siebenkäs*, see Klaus Pauler's edition, *Jean Paul: Siebenkäs. Text der Erstausgabe von 1796 mit den Varianten der Ausgabe von 1818 und den Vorarbeiten zu beiden Ausgaben aus dem Nachlaß* (München: edition text + kritik, 1991), an enterprise worthy of Jean Paul's own "Dutch" characters.

<sup>5</sup> There is another significant appearance of the author/narrator on the margin of the text, namely the preface to the narrative "Vorrede," where the first-person narrator tries to tell the *Siebenkäs* (and *Hesperus*) story to poor Johanne Paulline,

Poor Siebenkäs, however, does not have any luck. His increasing worries and the excessive cleaning activities of his wife Lenette keep him from concentrating on his writing, and without the completion of the book there is no hope so long as the legal procedures drag on "auf die lange Bank geschoben" (pushed back further and further into an uncertain future). This situation lasts through the winter—Richter always parallels the seasons with the mood of the action—until he is rescued by Leibgeber with a nifty solution to his problems: a *Scheintod*, a feigned death. And so it is that Siebenkäs escapes from Kuhschnappel, Lenette is now free to marry her true friend Stiefel, and Siebenkäs's beloved muse Natalie collects the life insurance on her name—Richter was accused by some readers of recommending insurance fraud. Siebenkäs changes his name once more, and takes Leibgeber's place as counsel to the count of Vaduz. Leibgeber is to disappear but not before appearing as Siebenkäs's ghost to the Heimlicher von Blaise who is frightened enough to render Siebenkäs's inheritance to Lenette; the court, it seems, never speaks. When Siebenkäs over a year later goes to visit Kuhschnappel, he finds out that Lenette died in childbirth. At her grave he meets Natalie, whom he will marry, thereby completing an ironic cycle of married life, death, and wedding.

The identity "game" is not completed until the end of the next novel, *Titan*. In it, Leibgeber has assumed the name Schoppe, and he is living with the nightmare that he may encounter his own self or ego, his "Ich."<sup>6</sup> After a search Siebenkäs discovers his old friend in a terrible state and, to alleviate the shock of seeing him, he says, "It's me, Siebenkäs, your old friend." To this Leibgeber/Schoppe can only answer, "Ich auch. Ich gleich Ich" (Me, too. I am the selfsame). His original name was indeed Siebenkäs. Now, in his final insanity, believing that he is trapped in his own ego, as God and the universe do not really exist, Siebenkäs/Leibgeber/Schoppe is ultimately alienated from his own self. But then the

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the merchant Oehrmann's daughter who is not allowed to read books. This preface brings to the fore the kind of author-reader relationship implied in Richter's texts.

<sup>6</sup> Jean Paul had studied the philosophy of Johann Gottlieb Fichte, which he considered a system of insane self-reflexivity. In the name of Leibgeber, he wrote a half-serious, half-satirical treatise against it, *Clavis Fichtiana seu Leibgeberiana* (1799).

narrator Jean Paul intervenes and indicates by Schoppe's dying smile that God's grace will grant him another, better life. This is the true goal of life: the transformation into a new existence, the reincarnation in another world, and the non-believing humorist will achieve it against his own beliefs.<sup>7</sup>

In *Siebenkäs*, the solution to Siebenkäs's existential problems, and thus the harmonizing of the poetry and prose of life, could happen in Kuhschnappel only through a *salto mortale*, a reincarnation in an ideal place.<sup>8</sup> In *Flegeljahre*, to which I now return, it seems impossible that the town of Haslau could ever be anything but prosaic and hostile to any kind of poetry and ideals, just like Kuhschnappel. In the Italian novels, there were always large parks and similar retreats for encounters of love and friendship and for religious ecstasies. But the German stories demand that the ideal be located within the realities of ordinary life. The question then arises as to where the poetry can be located in a prosaic environment.

The plot of *Flegeljahre*, while based on the same pattern, has a different twist. Gottwalt, or Walt, from the village of Elterlein, has returned from university and is supposed to be a lawyer, but in reality he is a poet, a poet by calling and not just a writer by necessity. Here, the miracle seems to happen in the beginning: the richest man in town, Van der Kabel, whose real name is Richter (!), dies and leaves his fortune not to his seven distant relatives, all prominent citizens of the town, but to the poor and naive lawyer-poet Walt. Only Van der Kabel's house goes to a relative, the one who, in a scene of rare comedy, is the first to shed tears over his demise. The terms of the will, however, dictate that Walt must prove himself worthy of the fortune by completing a formidable

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<sup>7</sup> The *Vorschule der Ästhetik* defines modern (romantic) humour in § 31 and 32 as the "inverse sublime," lifting us up while seeming to take us down. This view of humour has been seminal within the German tradition. For the sublime, see my study "Jean Paul Richter's School for Aesthetics: Humor and the Sublime," in *Eighteenth-Century German Authors and their Aesthetic Theories: Literature and the Other Arts*, ed. Richard Critchfield and Wulf Koepke (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1988) 185–202.

<sup>8</sup> In the novel this place is identified as the town of Bayreuth, as it appeared to Jean Paul in 1796; later, during his last twenty years, he was to live a very prosaic existence there. The intermingling of fictitious and real locations is characteristic of Jean Paul's work.

series of tasks. He has to work as a notary, correct the proofs of a book for a publisher, tune pianos, live one week each with the seven relatives, go on a hunt, and the list goes on. We never know how he fares because the book breaks off before even one quarter of the tasks is completed. But the pattern is clear: every time Walt makes a mistake, and he makes many of them, he loses some of the inheritance, and the entire fortune may be lost before he is done with all the tests. Completing them may be a false hope. Evidently, Van der Kabel thought that Walt would learn from the experience and come out wiser and more realistic, if not richer. Possibly, he left a secret fund for Walt after everything else was lost.<sup>9</sup> But the expected pattern of the *bildungsroman* does not seem to apply here. As far as we can tell from the four volumes of the novel, Walt never learns from his experience. Moreover, there is another plot that counteracts the first one. Walt has a twin brother, Vult (*Quod deus vult*), who ran away from home and now comes back and wants to help his brother (interestingly, these twins do not resemble one another).

Vult is a flutist and a gambler (both are *Spieler*), and he wrote J.P.F. Richter's first collection of satires, *Grönländische Prozesse* (Trials in Greenland) (1782–83). The author, J.P.F. Richter, inserts himself into the narrative in even more ways. Van der Kabel provided in his will that an "able writer" should be found to document Walt's story. The choice is of course J.P.F.R., who is compensated for his work by the items from Van der Kabel's *Kuriositätenkabinett*.<sup>10</sup> Walt and Vult, so long separated that Walt does not recognize Vult

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<sup>9</sup> According to his notes and plans, Richter toyed with different endings, but it is doubtful that he settled on one. While he always talked about completing *Fliegeljahre*, he never made an attempt to do so. See the old but still informative book by Karl Freye, *Jean Pauls Fliegeljahre. Materialien und Untersuchungen* (Berlin: Meyer & Müller, 1907).

<sup>10</sup> These curiosities, one per chapter, provide the chapter headings. For a long time scholars regarded them as mere curiosities, but on closer scrutiny, they reveal a new layer of meaning. See Gustav Lohmann, *Jean Pauls Fliegeljahre gegeben im Rahmen ihrer Kapitelüberschriften* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1990); for a critique of his findings, see Monika Schmitz-Emans, "Alles bedeutet und bezeichnet.' Überlegungen zu Jean Pauls Naturalienkabinett anlässlich Gustav Lohmanns Buch *Jean Pauls Fliegeljahre gegeben im Rahmen ihrer Kapitelüberschriften*," *Jahrbuch der Jean-Paul-Gesellschaft* 28 (1993): 135–68. Schmitz-Emans points out that the first investigation of this problem was done by Herman Meyer in his book *Zarte Empirie* (1963).

anymore, meet and identify themselves at a "Wirtshaus zum Wirtshaus," at an inn with the sign of an inn with the sign of an inn with ... and so *ad infinitum*, in the echoing self-reflexive manner of the Romantics, as the narrator J.P.F.R. aptly remarks. In this unreal environment<sup>11</sup> they decide to write a novel together, which they "Hoppelpoppel oder Das Herz" (Hoppelpoppel, or the Heart) after rejecting the title "Flegeljahre." This twin novel, later submitted to a publisher in an incomplete form, will be rejected because it is too much of an imitation of Richter's novels. Finally, it was Van der Kabel's stipulation that Walt would assume the name "Richter" when claiming the inheritance.

In both *Flegeljahre* and *Vorschule*, which he wrote concurrently, Richter is critical of Romantic self-reflexivity. Yet by any measure *Flegeljahre* is highly self-reflexive. Arguably, then, the work ought to be read as a critique of Romanticism.<sup>12</sup> In his early drafts and notes, Richter characterized Walt as resembling his earlier youthful self, and Vult as his later self at the time of writing the *Flegeljahre*.<sup>13</sup> Walt is a naive and idealistic poet, trusting everybody, living in a dream world. He writes a peculiar kind of verse he calls "Streckverse," which are in fact poetic epigrams in prose, or poetic aphorisms, a form Richter may have derived from Johann Gottfried Herder's translations of Greek epigrams, and that Richter continued to use independently after the *Flegeljahre*.<sup>14</sup> In these prose poems, Walt tries to lift common reality into an ideal realm. He convinces his beloved Wina to believe in this ideal world, but the citizens of Haslau have nothing but contempt for his poeticizing. Walt believes in the ideals of the young Richter, the ideals of love and friendship, and misunderstands the selfish and prosaic motives of others.

<sup>11</sup> For the *wirtshaus*, see the study of Leo Tönz, "Das Wirtshaus 'Zum Wirtshaus'. Zu einem Motiv in Jean Pauls *Flegeljabren*." *Jahrbuch der Jean-Paul-Gesellschaft* 55 (1970): 105–23.

<sup>12</sup> On this issue see the dissertation by Ephrem Holdener, *Jean Paul und die Frühromantik. Potenzierung und Parodie in den Flegeljabren*, University of Freiburg (Zurich/Paris: Thesis Verlag, 1993).

<sup>13</sup> On this point see Freye.

<sup>14</sup> I have analysed this form in my study "Abschied von der Poesie. *Flegeljahre* und die Auseinandersetzung mit Herder," *Jahrbuch der Jean-Paul-Gesellschaft* 25 (1990): 43–60, with further references. The "real" Herder makes a short appearance at the beginning of *Flegeljahre* and leaves a lasting impression on Walt during their brief meeting.

Vult, for his part, can see both sides: he knows the vagaries of human behavior and their base motivations, sex and greed, and yet he loves the innocence of his brother, who sees only a paradise of high-minded emotions and beliefs. Whereas Vult tries to warn Walt of how the disinherited relatives may try to deceive him, he realizes that should Walt become as worldly as he his poetry would dry up. The poeticizing of reality in the romantic mood of, say, Eichendorff, is based on an illusion or subjective, if not egocentric, projection. Prose and poetry do not mix. The point is made most evident in Walt's trip to the countryside in the third volume of *Flegeljahre*, where he is secretly watched by his brother who fills the air with the sounds of his flute, and who manipulates the little romantic "miracles" Walt encounters on his way.<sup>15</sup> It becomes increasingly clear that the "able writer" J.P.F.R. is drawing closer to Vult's perspective: what begins as a nostalgic look at past hopes and illusions, the "Erinnerung der Hoffnung," gives way to ever greater pessimism over how things will turn out for Walt and for society at large.

The balance of the style and structure of *Flegeljahre* depends on the double perspective of Walt and Vult, on its character as a twin novel. However, while Walt progresses well with the writing of "Hoppelpoppel oder Das Herz," Vult prefers living over writing. He, too, falls in love with Wina and the ensuing drama of jealousy pushes the twins apart. The conflict comes to a climax during a masked ball that both brothers attend and where Wina informs Vult that she loves Walt, not him. The novel ends with Vult's leaving Walt, shortly after Walt has told him a dream—Richter wrote many poetic dreams, but this is the most glorious.<sup>16</sup> Thus the novel ends with the highest poetic expression contrasting an everyday tragedy, the separation of the twins. Richter wanted to maintain the balance of serenity, irony, and friendly humour in the text, and he would have had a hard time maintaining this balance after Vult's disappearance.

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<sup>15</sup> Walt's wanderings became the model for Eichendorff's famous novella *Aus dem Leben eines Taugenichtes*. Eichendorff managed to provide a happy ending for the story before the prose of married life took over.

<sup>16</sup> It is evident that the dream is about creation and the future, but there have been numerous attempts to assign it a more specific meaning, not least a political one.

We realize that the young poet will not receive an earthly inheritance but rather, as society becomes more hostile, he will withdraw into his romantic shell. In his *Vorschule*, Richter had made the distinction between writers who were mere imitators of reality, the Romantics who lived in an ideal realm beyond reality, and the "poetic poets" who achieved the penetration of reality with the ideal, just as the "German" novel was supposed to do. He called the Romantics "nihilists," a word just coming into use at the time. We can see Walt, as likable as he is, in the danger of drifting into the realm of nihilism, and Van der Kabel, alias Richter, must have been of the same opinion, as he tried to get Walt involved in everyday reality. But where is the solution? We realize that the towns of Haslau and Kuhschnappel are not the locations for a people of "poets and thinkers," as the Germans liked to call themselves, following Madame de Staël; indeed, poets and thinkers have no place in Germany of the early nineteenth century.

It is easy to see now why the writer J.P.F.R. was unwilling to fulfill his contract and complete the account of Walt's story. As Vult, he had given up on Walt and did not want to tell a sad ending. Likewise, the twin's novel remains incomplete: Walt is unable to live it, and Vult is unable to write it. Fiction and reality cannot join, the twins cannot live together.

The end of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806 and, more importantly, the catastrophic defeat of the Prussian army by Napoleon soon afterwards, was considered by many Germans, Richter included, as a moral crisis. This is how he approached it in his political works *Friedens-Predigt an Deutschland* (1808) and *Dämmerungen für Deutschland* (1809). At the same time, there was a significant shift in the depiction of writers in his narrative works. Richter became convinced that practical skills and common sense were needed to master the national crisis, and that egotistic romantic writers were morally questionable and even dangerous.<sup>17</sup> In his mostly satirical story *Doktor Katzenbergers Badereise* (1811), Richter portrayed the playwright Nieß as vain, arrogant, shallow, and playing on the sentimentalities of women. But he did not ex-

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<sup>17</sup> I have pursued some of these points in "Gentle Ideas and Brutal Facts. Jean Paul's Dilemma after 1807," *Crisis and Culture in Post-Enlightenment Germany, Essays in Honour of Peter Heller*, ed. Hans Schulte and David Richards (Lanham, MD: UP of America, 1993) 73–88, with further references.

empt his own earlier works from criticism, satirizing for example in *Flegeljahre* the effects of his novel *Hesperus* on a sentimental girl.

In the political fight for freedom and the moral fight for a new society, the role of the dreaming poet becomes questionable. Conversely, in an utterly prosaic bourgeois society, there is nobody except dreamers who can remind the people of a true *Humanität* and the ideals of a better world. Henceforth, there seems to be no deciding or reconciliation between these two perceptions of the poet. It makes sense that the generation of Heinrich Heine and Ludwig Borne with their "Zerrissenheit" and their ideals of political freedom found much to their liking in J.P.F.R.'s works. As for Jean Paul and his fictional portraits, they turned out to be documents of the impossible dream of German Romantic idealism, still sublime and poetic, admired even by Emerson and his Concord circle, but far removed from the reality of a town like Bayreuth where J.P.F.R. would live after the period of the *Flegeljahre*. He never ceased, however, to place his narrator Jean Paul into more ideal locations, until his last unfinished work, *Selina oder über die Unsterblichkeit der Seele* (Selina, or On the Undyingness of the Soul) written between 1823 and 1825, a typically eighteenth-century topic in the face of nineteenth-century realities.

Heinrich Heine used a telling image when he tried to describe Jean Paul and his texts for a French audience: Jean Paul, he said, did not cut the umbilical cords of the characters that he created but maintained a direct connection with them, leaving them half-born and half-remaining within their creator. Once Jean Paul stopped believing in the advent of a better world in his lifetime, his characters lost the nourishment for their poetry and idealism. Still, the dreamer of the nightmare that there was no God kept his faith in God and the splendour order of the universe, even if this splendour would never appear to us humans. And that may be the last word of his romantic humour.