Travel records have long played only a minor role in historical research, mainly because of their highly personal nature. Travellers were suspected of exaggerating or distorting reality in their reports. This has begun to change. At first, social and economic historians were mostly interested in travel writing, especially in the period of industrialization. Since the 1980s, travel records have been discovered by historians and scholars of literature as useful tools of research. In 1982 Michael Harbsmeier, for example, outlined their value for the history of mentalities. Scholars read descriptions of journeys as a means of detecting a certain way of thinking. This allows them not only to make statements about what is perceived, such as another country, but also to gain information about the observer, for example, his social background, intellectual influences, and ways of thinking in his country of origin. Today, the study of travel literature is well established in the fields of history and literary criticism. Travel literature is seen as part and parcel of communicative structures within society, and as having an impact on world views and the exchange of ideas between individuals, groups, and societies.

So far, however, scholars in this field have focused mainly on the eighteenth century, exploring the development of the genre in the Age of Enlightenment. Less research has been devoted to the first half of the nineteenth century. What accounts there are have generally concentrated, in the case of German travel accounts about England, on standard texts by authors such as Hermann Pückler-Muskau, Heinrich Heine, and Theodor Fontane. In 1990 Peter Brenner went so far as to claim that despite the efforts of Heinrich Heine, who had introduced politics and journalism into travel writ-

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ing during the Vormärz period, the innovative potential of the genre had been exhausted by the middle of the century.²

Against this background, Tilman Fischer’s splendid study, concentrating on the period from around 1830 to 1870, fills a significant gap. It makes an important contribution to literary research and to the history of Anglo–German relations in the nineteenth century. The book originated in a dissertation at the University of Marburg and runs to more than 750 pages. Based on an amazing number of sources (20,000 pages of documents), its main aims are to add many unknown travel accounts to the present store of knowledge (Fischer records the entire spectrum of contemporary travel accounts, such as travel journals and diaries), and to examine writing strategies, readers’ expectations, and even their psychological dispositions during the period of modernization.

As the subtitle of his book indicates, Fischer discusses both general developments in the genre of travel literature, and the specific German encounter with modernity by concentrating on literary descriptions of visits to England. Located within a complex network of pre-conceived images, conventionalized writing strategies, and readers’ expectations, the texts produced can be seen as products of a period in which significant experiences were stored, and the intellectual notions which are communicated in public discourse were expressed. Thus travel writing conveys attitudes towards modernity that cannot be detected in other historical sources.

The book is divided into two parts, reflecting the main issues it addresses. The first introduces the reader to the genre of travel literature in nineteenth-century Germany and its specific code. Fischer presents his sources, their authors, and the contemporary readers they were written for. His material consists mainly of travel reports about England written in German and published between 1830 and 1870. However, he also includes accounts that originated during this time but remained unpublished until the twentieth century, such as reports by the socialist writer Georg Weerth and the popular novelist Ida Gräfin von Hahn-Hahn. In general, Fischer distinguishes four types of travel literature: a) accounts written for the general reader; b) accounts written for professional readers; c) travel guides; and

d) geography books and manners or customs books. He also gives due weight to the material prerequisites of the genre, that is, travelling itself. As a result of industrialization, travelling in Europe became easier in the nineteenth century as trains and steamships began to provide a reliable connection between England and the Continent. Travelling, especially for the purposes of tourism, became fashionable and affordable for wider social groups, but travelling comfortably remained the prerogative of the wealthy bourgeoisie and aristocracy.

This is the context within which Fischer locates his texts. What were the rules of the genre? Were there characteristic writing strategies? A thorough analysis of the theoretical discourse on travel literature in contemporary journals and dictionaries and a close reading of his source material allow Fischer to decipher the rules and conventions to which travel writers adhered, almost subconsciously, during the nineteenth century. The guiding principles for recording one’s experiences were, for example, the claims of veracity (Wahrhaftigkeit), directness (Unmittelbarkeit), and subjectivity (Subjektivität). The ‘binding and supra-individual nature of the texts’ (p. 13), the ‘poetics of the genre’, as Fischer calls it, thus emerge clearly from his account. As he looks in detail at the contemporary discussion about travel reports, Fischer explores the position of this genre in the social discourse, and, in particular, defines its social function. Literary travel reports, for example, counted as elevated popular literature, which was positioned somewhere between high literature and light fiction. Contemporaries clearly distinguished between academic and literary travel descriptions. Thus ‘travelling for pleasure and writing travel descriptions for entertainment had to fight for social acceptance as legitimate phenomena in the public estimation’ (p. 161).

Having outlined the material and conceptual framework of his study, Fischer in the second part focuses on one specific theme: perceptions of modernization within the context of nineteenth-century industrialization, and the role England played in this process for German observers. Fischer relies mainly on two types of travel literature: entertaining travel accounts for the general public, and academic reports for professional readers. Instead of merely summarizing the contents, however, like many such studies, Fischer analyses the production of images, stereotypes, and the patterns of argument
developed in travel reports, as well as the social role which these
texts played in society. The author’s intention is to clarify the ‘con-
structive character’ (p. 14) of travel literature by asking how reality
was constructed and interpreted by means of language, current
metaphors, topoi, and common patterns of interpretation and argu-
ment.

Linking his sources with contemporary academic texts and popu-
lar encyclopaedias, Fischer asks specifically how the German dis-
course on England shaped the Germans’ knowledge and perception
of that country in the period of modernization. It is well known that
for contemporary Germans, England was the epitome of modernity.
In the nineteenth century, Germans increasingly travelled to England
for the chance of having a glimpse of what the future might hold, for
they noticed a clear difference in level of development between
Germany and a progressive England. However, the travellers dis-
agreed about how to assess social changes in England. Fischer takes
up this point and investigates how German travel writers judged the
conditions which they experienced as modern. The author classifies
reactions in terms of four dimensions: spatial, comparative, tempo-
ral, and structural. Fischer’s analysis shows, for example, that in spa-
tial terms, German travellers accorded England a central position in
international trade. If, going beyond this, we look at the position of
the country in comparison with other states, this assessment corre-
sponds to a classification at the peak of the modernization process,
giving rise to the use of superlatives and expressions of uniqueness.

Fischer then examines how experiences of the ‘new time’ can be
observed and interpreted in particular areas by looking at themes
and areas of perception specific to modernity, such as the political
system, industrialization, the pauperization of large groups of the
population, and progressive urbanization. He is not concerned to dis-
cuss whether the information about England presented by the writ-
ers of the reports was historically accurate, or to elucidate its position
in the context of contemporary political movements. Rather, he con-
centrates on bringing out the theses, arguments, and modes of
metaphorical presentation which recur with some regularity in the
travel writing of this period.

Fischer brings out these patterns of language and argument clearly,
using a great deal of illustrative material. Thus, for example, in the
section on the political system, he explains the contexts in which
England offered travellers ‘a serious standard for comparison with conditions in their own countries’ (p. 470). The travel writers have little to say about the issues of day-to-day politics in England, concentrating instead on ‘judgements about the totality of political conditions with the intention of comparing systems’. Summing up, Fischer states that despite the comparatively long period covered by his investigation, he is able to identify a ‘relatively manageable and historically stable reservoir’ (p. 641) of collective patterns for dealing with and interpreting modernity in travel writing. This revises some of the views which have been held for decades (pp. 644 ff.). It is noticeable that the veracity of the experiences of England described seems to be guaranteed only if the individual author uses ‘established models of perception’ and topoi (p. 642) when describing his travels. And this, in turn, strengthens the structures of the genre.

The book contains a valuable appendix comprising an exhaustive list of travel reports enriched with biographical details of authors and their position in nineteenth-century German society. Not least because of this treasure-trove of information, Fischer’s book is a highly recommended addition to the growing body of literature on travel writing. Leaving the well-researched Age of Enlightenment, it ventures into unknown territory and charts the development of German travel writing on a modernizing England in the nineteenth century. The study will be of great interest not only to students of literature but also to historians. Tilman Fischer’s systematic research provides a foundation for further work, and makes a valuable contribution to the long-standing interest in the relationship between England and Germany.

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