

CONTEMPORARY BRITISH WOMEN WRITERS

Texts and Strategies

Edited by

Robert E. Hosmer Jr.
Lecturer in English, Smith College
Northampton, Massachusetts

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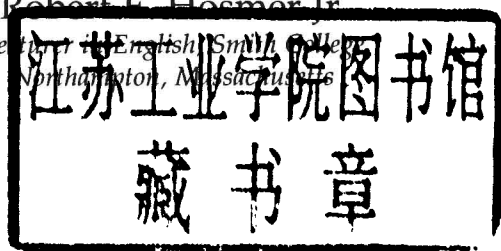
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Notes on the Contributors

Brett T. Averitt is Associate Professor of English at Westfield (MA) State College, where she teaches courses in British and American literature, the structure of the novel and linguistics. She has written and published essays on several women writers, including Muriel Spark, Penelope Mortimer and Cynthia Seton. She is also a poet and has written a volume of poetry on friendship and other topics. She is co-founder of the Northampton (MA) Women's Center, an organization devoted to the study of women's past and current lives.

Clare Boylan, born and educated in Dublin, began her writing career as a journalist, working as a reporter, feature writer, and editor. In addition, she has reviewed books for Eireann radio and television and contributed to several magazines. In 1983 she published her first novel, *Holy Pictures*, described by William Trevor as 'sharp as a serpent's tooth'. That was followed by a collection of fifteen stories, *A Nail on the Head* (1983) and another novel, *Last Resorts* (1984). Most recently, a third novel, *Black Baby* (1988) and another collection of short stories, *Concerning Virgins* (1989) have appeared; critical response to those volumes has confirmed the promise discerned in her earlier work. In addition, she has written the introduction to the Virago and Penguin reprints of Molly Keane's *Taking Chances*.

Robert Owen Evans was educated at the University of Chicago and the University of Florida. He pursued additional graduate work at Harvard University. In the course of a long and distinguished career as teacher and scholar, Professor Evans served as Professor and Director of the University Honors Program at the University of Kentucky, and as Professor and Director of the General Honors Program at the University of New Mexico. In addition, he served in 1977 as President of the National Collegiate Honors Council. He is the author/editor of eleven volumes and the author of more than fifty scholarly articles, and a novel.

Ernest H. Hofer was educated at Brown, Oxford and Cornell. His academic career has veered toward the administrative; he spent six years in Heidelberg, Germany as Associate Director and Acting

Director, University of Maryland European Division; eight years as Associate and Acting Head of the English Department at the University of Massachusetts; eight years as Faculty Dean at the University of Massachusetts. He founded and was Director from 1966 to 1988 of the Oxford Summer Seminar, Trinity College, Oxford. Meanwhile as Professor of English, he taught during the entire tenure of his administrative period, especially in the areas of his special research: Henry James, Hawthorne, the contemporary British novel and the Bloomsbury Group. He has published in *The New Yorker*, in England on the British novel, and lectured on Henry James, Hawthorne and Oxford on both sides of Atlantic.

Robert E. Hosmer Jr. was educated at Holy Cross College, Smith College, the University of Massachusetts/Amherst and Trinity College, Oxford. He is currently a Lecturer in the Department of English Language and Literature at Smith College. He formerly taught at the University of Massachusetts, where he received the University's Distinguished Teaching Award, and at Mount Holyoke College. He has published widely on contemporary British and Irish writers, particularly Anita Brookner, Edna O'Brien and Muriel Spark. He also regularly reviews for *Commonweal*, the *Boston Globe* and the *New York Times*. A specialist in Anglo-Saxon poetry and the teaching of writing, he is the author of the *Guide* to the seventh edition of *The Norton Reader*.

Ann Hulbert, a Senior Editor of *The New Republic*, works on the literary section of the magazine. She has written for *The New Republic*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The New York Times* and other publications. Her biography of Jean Stafford was published in the spring of 1992.

Joseph Hynes is Professor of English at the University of Oregon, where he has been a member of the Faculty since 1957. He has been a Visiting Professor of English at the Daido Institute of Technology in Nagoya, and an Exchange Professor at the University of Tubingen. His special interests include modern literature, Henry James, contemporary British fiction, and experimental fiction. His publications on James, Dickens, Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, Henry Green, J. F. Powers and Doris Lessing have appeared in such journals as *American Literature*, *ELH*, *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*,

Criticism, Twentieth Century Literature, Modern Language Quarterly, and the Iowa Review. His critical study, *The Art of the Real: Muriel Spark's Novels* appeared in 1988.

Walter Kendrick is Professor of English at Fordham University, New York City. From 1986 to 1988 he was Senior Editor of the *Village Voice* and the *Voice Literary Supplement*. He is co-editor, with Perry Meisel, of *Bloomsbury/Freud: The Letters of James and Alix Strachey 1924-1925* (1985), and the author of *The Novel Machine: The Theory and Fiction of Anthony Trollope* (1987), *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (1987), *The Thrill of Fear* (1991) and numerous articles and reviews in academic and popular journals.

Jenny Newman has a particular interest in contemporary British women's fiction, which she teaches for the Department of Continuing Education at Liverpool University, Chester College and the University of Massachusetts Summer Seminar at Trinity College, Oxford. Her recent editing of *The Faber Book of Seductions* (1988) brought her considerable praise as well as a highly popular round of television and radio appearances. Her co-written novel, *Connections*, was shortlisted for the 1989 Constable Trophy.

Jean Sudrann is Mary E. Woolley Professor of English Emeritus of Mount Holyoke College (South Hadley, MA) She received her BA degree from Mount Holyoke, her MA and PhD from Columbia University. She holds the honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters from Mount Holyoke. Her publications include essays on both Victorian and modern novelists in *Victorian Studies*, *ELH*, *Antioch Review*, *Studies in the Novel* and *The Dickens Quarterly*.

Introduction

From Jane Austen to Virginia Woolf the literature of England has been graced with first-rate fiction written by women. Nevertheless, no English generation has contained as many talented women novelists as contemporary England now enjoys. *Contemporary British Women Novelists: Texts and Strategies* brings to the attention of readers and teachers of literature a selection of writers – all of them women, all of them English (with the exception of the Anglo-Irish novelist Molly Keane and the Scots writer Muriel Spark) – demonstrating a renaissance in English literature. It can be argued that the most exciting contemporary writing is being done by women; several of England's rich collection of talent have earned international critical and popular acclaim. The work of Muriel Spark, for example, is known and appreciated throughout the English-speaking world and beyond, as a substantial number of her novels have been translated into other languages. Yet other women writers included here merit greater attention than they have heretofore received. It is our hope that this volume will bring these exciting and talented women writers to an even larger audience of new readers.

The chapter on each writer consists of four parts: a substantial critical essay written in clear, jargon-free, accessible prose with parenthetical documentation and minimal notes; a primary bibliography ('Writings by X') that is as exhaustive and up-to-date as possible; a secondary bibliography ('Writings About X') that is selective rather than exhaustive; and a brief biographical sketch.

Subsequent volumes will deal with other contemporary women writers not included here. Two additional volumes are planned: one, to cover a number of modern/contemporary women writers like Murdoch, Lessing, Drabble, Figs, Gilliat, Lehmann, O'Brien, and Bainbridge; the other, to present some of the dissident voices in contemporary fiction like Winterson, Desai, Gordimer, and Jhabvala.

Robert O. Evans's 'Sybille Bedford: A Paradise of Dainty Devices' examines Bedford's major fiction from *A Legacy* (1956) to *Jigsaw* (1989) and illuminates the extraordinary craft of this neglected writer by minute attention to technical elements and rhetorical strategies. Evans probes well beneath the prose surface, uncovering structures of enduring strength, intricately and paradoxically constructed from

those 'dainty devices'. His essay derives added strength and dimensions through references to Bedford's non-fiction, to the work of writers in the great tradition of European letters (Tolstoi and Stendhal) and English literature (Milton, James), to modern European history and through a judicious use of biographical detail.

My own essay, 'Paradigm and Passage: the Fiction of Anita Brookner', focuses on three of the ten novels of this art historian turned novelist who, in the course of only ten years as a fiction writer, has achieved not only a McConnell Booker Prize (1984) but extraordinarily apt comparison to writers like James, Woolf, and Proust. Taking exile to be the central concern of Brookner's fiction, I have attempted to combine the Biblical paradigm of that experience and what Stanley B. Greenfield took to be the formulaic expression of that theme in Anglo-Saxon poetry, then apply it to *Providence* (1982), *Hotel Du Lac* (1984), and *Latecomers* (1989). That process reveals some of the ways in which Brookner foregrounds exile as what Joseph Brodsky has called both 'a linguistic event' and 'a metaphysical condition'.

Ann Hulbert's essay, 'The Great Ventriloquist: A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance*', focuses attention on this writer's latest and clearly most important novel. Deeming the novel a 'tour-de-force of university fiction', Hulbert illuminates the strategies by which Byatt foregrounds linguistic and critical matters while juxtaposing the narrative of two contemporary literary scholars with the tale of two nineteenth-century artists. The result, in Hulbert's estimate, is a twice-told tale post-structuralist critics would be wise to heed.

In 'The Real Magic of Angela Carter', Walter Kendrick cross-sections the fictions of Carter, perhaps the most daring and experimental writer included here, and describes them mostly aptly as 'bizarre amalgams of tale and essay, delicacy and grossness, studded with literary allusion and jewelled here and there with poetry'. Kendrick's richly synthetic critical approach, drawing upon the insights and strategies of recent theory, enables him to reveal the dynamics of the fiction of this feisty, sometimes irreverent, always provocative contemporary writer.

The fictions of Isabel Colegate chosen by Brett Averitt for her essay, 'The Strange Clarity of Distance: History, Myth, and Imagination in the Novels of Isabel Colegate', lend themselves to a particularly rewarding analysis when Averitt uses a device she calls 'the Keats code' to show the interplay of history and individual creativ-

ity. From the discussion, Colegate emerges as a mythmaker who maps out her own reading of history, subverting commonplace causal connexions while calling into question received understandings of major historical events and notions of human behaviour.

When Jean Sudrann examines the novels of Penelope Fitzgerald, she foregrounds matters metaphysical and epistemological to show just how Fitzgerald understands the dynamics of human personality within a larger scheme of things. Sudrann's discussion derives its resonance and persuasive power from her ability to combine the insights of narrative theory with Scriptural and cultural insight.

Ernest Hofer's essay, 'Enclosed Structures, Disclosed Lives: the Fictions of Susan Hill', offers a poetics of space as a reading guide to the work of this contemporary novelist. Hofer demonstrates not only how physical and fictive structures intersect in Hill's fiction, but how, by manipulating the relationship between physical space and character development through a dynamics of shifting distances, Hill has crafted fictions of keen psychological insight and Gothic pleasure.

Clare Boylan ('Sex, Snobbery and the Strategies of Molly Keane') describes Keane as a writer who renders 'an energetic dissection of human nature'. Boylan locates sexual politics at the center of Keane's fiction, and demonstrates how, from her early novel, *Taking Chances* (1929) to her latest, *Queen Lear* (1989), Keane has revealed a vanished era in all its insufferable, class-based claustrophobia.

Reviewing Muriel Spark's extraordinary literary achievements, Joseph Hynes isolates a number of techniques and choices that characterize her craft in 'Muriel Spark and the Oxymoronic Vision'. These recur with such consistency that Hynes is led to speak of 'the persistence of some definite Sparkian preoccupations'. His essay makes generous and judicious use of insights drawn from psychology and theology as well as literary theory and history in qualifying the unique excellences of this prolific writer.

Jenny Newman's 'See Me as Sisyphus, But Having a Good Time: The Fiction of Fay Weldon' devotes attention to specific textual strategies while illuminating the evolution of Weldon's feminism. Newman puts what she learns at the service of a larger endeavour. What emerges is a fascinating exercise in cultural decomposition and literary composition.

Like all books, *Contemporary British Women Writers* has been a long-term project and over two years have elapsed between my idea

and the creation of the volume you now hold. During that time I received assistance, support, and encouragement from a number of sources. Scholarly research assistance was so generously given by the staff of the Williston Memorial Library, Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, Massachusetts, that words are inadequate; I must, however, single out Kuang-Tien Yao, Interlibrary Loan Librarian, and Kathleen Egan Norton, Reference Librarian: it is no vacant cliché to say that this book would not have come to be without their patient, cheerful, and thoroughly professional guidance.

To Barbara Kozash, Office Manager – Humanities Cluster, Smith College, I owe thanks for so many tasks performed so efficiently and for such good cheer, day in, day out.

To Margaret Cannon, Editor at Macmillan, I extend genuine gratitude for the kind of belief and support found with decreasing frequency in the world of publishing today, and for extraordinary patience and skill devoted to this transatlantic project.

My greatest debt remains to the nine scholars who have contributed to this volume; from the extraordinary range of their knowledge and the generosity of their hearts they have given so much, and just for the cause. Thank you. While I am indeed in their debt, so too are all those who now love this literature as well as those who will come to love it through our book. The words of William Wordsworth, at the end of *The Prelude*, aptly express what each of us had in mind from the very beginning:

What we have loved,
Others will love, and we will teach them how.

Northampton, Massachusetts

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1

Sybilie Bedford: A Paradise of Dainty Devices

ROBERT OWEN EVANS

When last I wrote about Sybilie Bedford, for Jack I. Biles' *British Novelists Since 1900* (New York, AMS Press, 1987), I began with a quotation from a strange prayer by Aldous Huxley: 'Faith is not believing in something which our intelligence denies. It is the choice of the nobler hypothesis. Faith is the resolve to place the highest meaning on the facts which we observe.'¹ It still seems to me a sure stepping-stone, for while the writing of the two novelists – close friends for many years – is immeasurably different, both are dedicated to exalted themes, to that higher purpose Huxley called 'the nobler hypothesis'.

Sybilie Bedford's higher purpose is, I think, particularly clear in her first and most important novel, *A Legacy*, though it is also discernible in her last and most recent book, *Jigsaw* (New York, 1989). When Weidenfeld and Nicholson published *A Legacy*, in 1956, the reviews were generally laudatory and enthusiastic, but most of them seem to have missed the point. Typical perhaps was the judgment of Evelyn Waugh, who wrote that *A Legacy* is a book 'of entirely delicious quality, witty, elegant, and uproariously funny' in his notice in the *Spectator*. It is all of these things, but it is also much more, a book with serious and important themes, as I shall try to illustrate, and also one which is technically very complex, laden with sophisticated, rhetorical devices aimed at drawing the reader into her scheme, far beyond the scope of most first novels. But while *A Legacy* was Sybilie Bedford's first *published* novel, it was by no means an initial effort. Twenty years earlier (1936) in Sanary, that unfashionable part of southern France where the Huxleys also had a house, she tells us Maria Huxley found time from her busy schedule to type parts of a novel for her. That juvenalia, we now learn from *Jigsaw*, was refused by all the publishers to whom it was submitted, and the author now seems to agree with their judgment. When *A Legacy* finally did

appear, it came after twenty years of training and education. The reviewer for the *Daily Express* who thought 'it reads like Nancy Mitford at her most brilliant' failed to discern the forest for the trees.

A Legacy begins, as Shakespeare often began his plays, with the dashing display of wit that blinded some of the reviewers but contributed to a verbal economy we have not seen the like of since, perhaps, *Pride and Prejudice*, with some new twists to tried and true devices, and high comic intensity.

The story, told by a narrator, Francesca, begins with the first nine years of her life, which she spent 'bundled to and fro between two houses', a town house on Voss Strasse in what is now West Berlin, the family home of the Merz family, the parents of her father's first, deceased wife, and a chateau in southern Bavaria, in the Vosges, purchased by her father for her mother. The chateau was as beautiful as Voss Strasse was ugly. But it is Voss Strasse that sets the immediate tone, Francesca's House of Seven Gables. She was not, however, born there. That would have been unthinkable. *Cela ne se fait pas parmi les gens de cet milieu*. Instead a flat was rented in Charlottenburg for the birthing, chosen because it had street access for the horses. The Von Feldens, her father's family, liked their animals to live at home, not in livery stables. In Charlottenburg only a thin wall separated Francesca's mother's bedroom from the sound of horses chomping at night, which Caroline found 'consoling'. Bedford says it was the beginning of the century, but we may assume, since there is a heavy autobiographical dimension to the novel, the year was 1911, the year Sybille Bedford was born.

The house she was not born in but moved to after three weeks backed on the Imperial Chancellery and belonged to Arthur and Henrietta Merz, upper Jewish bourgeoisie, descendants of the former Henrietta Merz, who rose from the ghetto to keep a fashionable salon frequented by such notables as Goethe, Mirabeau, Schleiermacher, and the Humboldts, in the glorious days of *Sturm und Drang* and the glittering intellectual accomplishments of eighteenth-century Germany. The Merzes, however, had not lived up to the excitements of their ancestor, nor even to the remarkable financial accomplishments of the generation that followed, the fortune-founding and scientific discoveries of the Oppenheim(er)s, Mendelsohns, and Simons. By 1911 they lived in absolute isolation.

A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME

What else might we expect from a family called Merz? In German the word means *cull* or *reject* (related to *ausmerzen*, to *sort out* or *take away*), and they are certainly rejects, even from the lively threads of German Jewish society of the era. (A portent perhaps of what was to become of that whole milieu after 1933.) The other names Bedford calls up – she too can call spirits – make it all too clear. The Mendelsohns are, no doubt, the bankers, Joseph and Abraham, founders of the great fortune, or perhaps their descendant Franz, born in 1865, who lived until 1935, former President of the German Chamber of Commerce who became in 1931 President of the International Chamber of Commerce. Nor should we forget that the family descended from Moses Mendelsohn, the Jewish philosopher known as the ‘German Socrates’.

I am not so sure about the Oppenheims (or Oppenheimers), though there was a Franz in the nineteenth-century who became a noted economist. His brother Carl was also well known, as a physiologist and chemist. And there were of course Simons everywhere – a very different circle from that of the first Henrietta Merz, less brilliant but in its own way no less distinguished. In any case we would not expect the second generation to be the equals of Goethe and Mirabeau. Schleiermacher must surely have been Fredrick Ernest Daniel, noted theologian and philosopher. The Humboldts were either Baron Alexander von Humboldt, scientist and diplomat, or his brother Wilhelm, the linguist, or both. (Had I to choose I think I might favour Wilhelm, for Henrietta Merz herself was no mean linguist and ‘like George Eliot . . . spoke English, German, French, Italian, Spanish, Latin, Greek and Hebrew, and unlike George Eliot she could also read in Swedish’.) No traces survived at Voss Strasse.

No music was heard there. Schubert and Haydn were aliens. No Corot landscapes were added to the Delacroix. The Merzes were too busy ‘adding bell-pulls and thickening the upholstery’. No animal’s foot sullied the carpeting. The newspaper the family read – rather, had read to them by the butler Gottlieb – was the *Kreuz Zeitung*, already much out of date and devoted mainly to recording births, deaths, and marriages. Money was handled (literally) by the butler and always in crisp new bills. Banknotes were considered unsanitary; ‘the problem of change was not envisaged’ (*A Legacy*, 17).

High drawing-room comedy laced with sparkling wit – little wonder the reviewers responded with enthusiasm. And it gets better, Grandpapa Merz, turning ninety, still took carriage exercise in the afternoons, accompanied by a ‘shapely leg’. But there were no shapely legs to amuse him in the Merz circle where even the younger relatives had already done their seventh season at Marienbad. To this dilemma Gottlieb found a solution in the Prussian aristocracy where ‘long, well turned legs’ were natural to the caste. This point, five pages into the novel, marks Bedford’s introduction to the Prussians and the point at which one of her major themes begins; that is, Prussianism (or the Prussian Problem), one of the ingredients which, mixed into German history, brought about three disastrous wars within a century.

Look more closely at those Prussian ladies who pass as shadows in Arthur Merz’s carriage, sisters and widows of line officers – none of them well-off. Gottlieb paid them for their innocent services – or were they really quite so innocent? Bedford supplies a nice list of their names (her list of ships that pass in the afternoon – her version of a descent from the sublime to the ridiculous?). Fraulein von Bluchtenau (from German *blicken*: I might translate as ‘one of a shining appearance’ or, figuratively, ‘Miss Well Scrubbed’); Fraulein von der Wahlenwitz (‘Miss Senseless’); Frau von Stein (German *stone* or *rock*, ‘Mme. Hard Face or Hard Nose’, though *Stein* can sometimes mean a piece at the game of draughts – but surely that would be too far-fetched); Frau von Demuth (‘Mme. Humble’); Fraulein zu der Hardeneck (‘Miss Hard Neck’ or ‘Stiff Nose’ – she was mortally offended when Grandpapa tried to slip a banknote under her garter); Frau von Kummer (‘Mme. Trouble’); and finally Fraulein von Kalkenrath (‘Miss Quick Lime’ – who left in a huff and had to be hastily replaced).

A single example of the traditional, ancient art of casting character by the name given might suffice, but I list all the shapely legs to show there is nothing accidental here. The author is playing a complicated cross-language word game, perhaps at such length in hopes the reader cannot miss her point. No other English novelist I know is as clever at cross-language word games as Bedford, save perhaps Anthony Burgess. His invention of the argot ‘Nadsat’ in *A Clockwork Orange* is as brilliant and more pervasive, though it is based on a kind of clipped Russian instead of familiar German. Often, of course, such word games are monolingual, played in the language of the text, but even so they can become very complicated, as for instance

in Shakespeare's wondrous passages of oxymora in the speeches of both Romeo and Juliet.

After such verbal fireworks Bedford pulls in on the reins to introduce a new question – money. Money, after all, lies close to the heart of the realistic novel, and who could deny that *A Legacy* is really aimed at the realistic portrayal of unvarnished truth? 'Young Russleben owes everywhere', Gottlieb announces during luncheon. Then a rather crude below stairs joke: 'He is being pressed by his tailor.' Suitable for a butler, though not germane to the novel, but the real purpose lies deeper – to permit the introduction of Francesca's father Julius. Bedford rarely resists an opportunity for verbal play. Here she names the tailors Fasskessel and Muntmann, but the slightly obtuse Julius automatically ignores those names. He simply cannot understand why anyone would go to a German tailor. From this delicate and comic beginning Bedford is able to push her readers into acquaintance with the rest of the family, the sisters Flora and Melanie (who was Julius's first wife) – both died young of consumption. Then the second son, Fredrick Merz, a man of mediocre intellect but at times stout instincts, university-trained, well placed by the family in a government career but doomed never to rise because he has brought his French mistress Jeanne with him to Berlin. (Jeanne, however, grows into a stronger character later in the novel.) From the first she is unacceptable at Voss Strasse. In that age of rubber tubs she brought with her from Paris a silver bidet. Fredrick has set her up in a hat shop – realistic enough, though why mistresses were thought to have a talent for selling hats (or gloves) is one of those mysteries of civilized Europe that remains to this day unsolved. The day after Henrietta Merz died, Fredrick married her.

Introductions to other important characters follow. Eduard Merz, the elder son, and his wife Sarah Genz-Kastell, the Frankfort aniline heiress, a rich, 'clear-brained woman, elegant rather than beautiful' (17). And Eduard (Edu) himself, a rake and a gambler, now a bankrupt bailed out eleven times by the family or by Sarah. Finally she had enough, sued for a financial separation, offering Edu either a generous allowance or divorce. In twentieth-century Germany women of the upper classes were not, as some people believe, mere chattels of their husbands. Still an action like Sarah's, accompanied by a newspaper announcement stating that she would no longer be responsible for his debts, caused a storm of scandal. It also drove Edu to the money lenders, an act that drove his father Arthur Merz into a fury: 'Who does the fool think he is, a Goy?'

No doubt Eduard did think of himself as a Goy or at least the social equal of the class with which he associated. That was a time when the sons of Jewish magnates were accepted in Germany with no sign of prejudice. Money and lifestyle were what mattered. The changes that occurred twenty years later, when Hitler and his Nazi gang came to power, could not have been dreamed of in 1911. The Kaiser would have turned in his grave had he known that a German government would come to consider its greatest task a final, permanent solution to what they called 'The Jewish Problem'. By filling in the backgrounds as she does, with the wit and insight of a very skilful novelist, Bedford, like Joseph Conrad, enables us to *see* how it took place. This is heady stuff and subtle, too. Through such portraits we come to understand better what the holocaust was all about without her ever directly mentioning it.

Sarah's shocking reaction to her husband's gambling debts is a small mechanism for suggesting the larger question, which 'goes without saying'. The closest she comes is in a short passage describing the Kaiser when he learned what Sarah had done. He 'was furious. He made a scene at Eulenberg . . . for fifteen years he had tried to get rid of anti-semitism . . . those Kastells thought they owned the world . . . those debts would have to be paid' (27). His Majesty considered sending a letter of sympathy to Grandpapa Merz, a tremendous indiscretion, until 'Bulow persuaded him to keep his oar out'. And that of course is what a large number of the German nobility did, *kept their oars out*, turned their attention to Prussian military schemes, leading twice to world war – until, it appears, fairly late in the Second World War, they had finally had enough. They plotted to destroy the tyrant in his bunker in East Prussia.

This is indeed very serious business, though we come to it through delicious comedy. That tone continues, somewhat mitigated, when Bedford next describes the von Feldens, the other side of Francesca's family, her father's people. Julius rose from a line of Bavarian country gentlemen of cultured if not intellectual interests, bored by the abstract and by letters, more French than German: 'The French Revolution was still alive with them as a calamity, and of the Industrial they were not aware' (32). No Felden had borne arms since the Reformation, 'their home was Catholic Western Continental Europe, and the centre of their world was France. They ignored, despised, and later dreaded Prussia; and they were strangers to the sea'. (32)