

E. H. Gombrich, A Grillparzer Anecdote, German Life and Letters, Vol. NS 16, 1962-3, pp.209-11 [Trapp no.1963D.1]

The little incident that is here related has not to my knowledge ever been recorded in print.[1] Though it must have happened more than 107 years ago it comes to me through one intermediary only. I heard it around 1934 from a granddaughter of the great Austrian geologist Eduard Süss [2] (1831 – 1914), who had obviously liked to recall it as a characteristic snapshot of Grillparzer in his capacity as the Director of the 'Hofkammerarchiv'.[3] When the poet retired from this post in 1856 after forty-three years in the Austrian civil service Süss had only recently started on a similar career as 'Kustos-Adjunkt' (assistant curator) in the 'Hofmineralienkabinett', an office from which he was soon to be liberated by the offer of a Chair in the University of Vienna.

One day the young scientist called on Grillparzer in his office and the old man had just warmed to a pleasant chat when they were interrupted by a knock on the door. A timid 'Amtsdienner' appeared and asked in a polite whisper whether the 'Herr Registratursdirektor' had a certain file in his office? 'No', was the answer, and the conversation continued. After half an hour the messenger appeared again; his superior would be most grateful if the Herr Direktor would be so good as to look once more for the file in question. They had searched high and low and the matter was urgent. 'But I have told you', Grillparzer snorted, 'I have not got it.' The conversation flowed on happily when once more there was a faint knock. The embarrassed messenger had returned with his superior's expression of profound regrets, but as far as could be ascertained all the records indicated that the vanished file had been passed to the Director; would he have the great kindness to look again among his papers? This time Grillparzer grew really angry. 'Out with you,' he shouted. Hardly had the poor man retreated than Grillparzer's face lit up; he opened a drawer and pointed with his finger at a file: 'Here it is,' he said, 'but I won't be plagued.'

Translated and in cold print the anecdote may not look worth rescuing from oblivion. 'C'est le ton qui fait musique'; and the tone is that of old Austrian, of that 'Kakenien' so lovingly and so knowingly described by Robert Musil: 'Do is er, aber sekkieren lass I mi net.' Sekkieren (from Italian seccatura) is in itself a word imbued with flavour of Austrian usage, untouched by German purism. Its meaning ranges from teasing, baiting or tormenting, as children do at school, to the nagging and pestering of grown-ups and the maltreatment and persecution of the underdog by a superior.[4] The civil servant's first concern must always be to nip any such attempt in the bud – in Austria as elsewhere. His motto is 'principiis obsta'. If you give in today because the file is in your drawer, the pestering might only be worse another time when you really have not got it.

But the sympathetic interpreter of Grillparzer's diaries to whom this number is dedicated [5] may perhaps find a little more in this absurd story than a sociological symptom. How Grillparzer had despised himself some twenty-five years earlier when he had accepted his post! 'I have got the Directorship of the Archive and thus have sold the Son of Man for thirty pieces of silver ... A certain feeling that I am done for has made me seek and accept the position.'[6] And a few months later: 'The office will not give in. It is not as if the work failed to interest me. This rummaging in old files, this busy idling of the official's life has actually got something refreshing for me in my present mood. But it is only the incidentals that appeal to me; the business as such, I fear, remains undone. And then there is my staff whom I should supervise, whom I should make work and to whom I should allocate their work. I, who have only busied myself with myself all my life and cannot even manage that. And then, what kind of creature they are! I had imagined them more hostile, more ignorant, more useless. But things would work better if they were worse. I see how they hope to trip me up, but since there is no resistance I cannot turn against them. Apart from that, I feel myself that what I

have done so far is useless. I cannot achieve anything without a certain degree of enthusiasm. But then so much imagination gets mixed up with the real données, that the whole easily becomes shadow-boxing with an imaginary opponent...'[7]

Towards the end of his first year he got at least the satisfaction of a minor row: 'Weibel, the "Adjunct" in the archive who showed some inclination to sulk has eaten humble pie. It gave me a pleasant sensation.'[8]

Few civil servants can have dissected their own aggressive feelings with such merciless honesty as this great introspective, for whom everyday he continued to live and work was a triumph over the incubus.[9] And yet, he not only came to terms with his existence, he earned the respect and genuine recognition of his superiors.

'Imbued with a sense of duty and of honour Grillparzer has grasped the importance of the office with which he has been entrusted and has spared no effort in bringing order into all parts of the archive, arranging for comprehensive and yet concise headings, subheadings and indices...so as gradually to introduce more clarity and cohesion into the documents and files which reach back as far as the Middle Ages. Such laudable endeavour, that has proved its worth in the documentation required for comprehensive and complex cases, concerned with fiscal demands or the rejection of claims on the public administration, deserves, in my humble opinion, all the more your Majesty's most gracious recognition since Grillparzer, in order to meet the demands of our recent eventful times, has largely had to renounce his inclination for literary work...'[10]

And that was how Süß found him towards the end of his career, dealing with files such as (I quote at random) 'The Report of the Finanz-Archiv Direktion concerning the question whether the Carinthian decree governing hammer-nail forges and wiremills had also been extended to Carniola?'[11] Can we blame the author Wehdem, der lügt if once in a while he introduced a little fiction into the prose of his routine? He, if anyone, knew when he engaged in shadow-boxing, he knew that if he felt tormented it was not by those who asked for the file. He had avowed to himself that what he secretly desired was their hostility rather than their politeness. But had he not suffered so much genuine chicanery from a timid bureaucratic censorship that he had to hold on to his self-respect by means fair or foul? 'Sekkieren lass I mi net.'

NOTES

1 It is not to be found, at any rate, in the six volumes of Grillparzer's *Gespräche und die Charakteristiken Seiner Persönlichkeit durch die Zeitgenossen* (Schriften des Literarischen Vereins in Wien), (1904), 3, (1905), 6, (1906), 12, (1910), 15, (1911) and *Neue Nachträge*, Wien, (1941).

2 My informant was Frau Hedwig Heller, widow of the bookseller Hugo Heller.

3 Grillparzer's official career is fully documented in Carl Glossy, 'Grillparzers Beamtenlaufbahn', *Jahrbuch der Grillparzer-Gesellschaft*, II, 1892, and Hanns Leo Mikoletzky, 'Franz Grillparzer und das Hofkammerarchiv', *Jahrbuch der Grillparzer-Gesellschaft*, III. Folge, I. Band, 1953. See also *Grillparzers Werke*, herausgeg. von August Sauer, III. Abteilung, 6. Band (Aktenstücke).

4 The definition in Grimm's *Wörterbuch* (1905) fits our context exactly; 'In Wein. . . jemand durch ungerechte Vorwürfe oder durch blosser Laune Verdruss bereiten'. The best paraphrase would probably be: 'They do this just to annoy me, but I won't stand any nonsense'. The editor of this journal

has kindly called my attention to Karg von Bebenburg's use of this word in his letter quoted in Dr M. E. Gilbert's article in this number, p. 206 above.

5 Edna Purdie, 'Two Nineteenth-century Diaries and their Writers (Hebbel and Grillparzer)', *Publications of the English Goethe Society*, N.S. XV, 1946.

6 January 25th, 1832.

7 March 11th, 1832.

8 September 12th, 1832 (all three extracts quoted by Carl Glossy, *loc. cit.*).

9 Cf. Hans Hoff and Ida Cermak, Grillparzer, *Versuch einer Pathographie*, Vienna, 1961.

10 From the application of Grillparzer's superior, Freiherr von Kübeck, for a rise in the poet's salary in 1844, cf. Carl Glossy, *loc. cit.*

11 December 20th, 1855, *Werke*, vol. cit., p. 365.