

## AN INTERVIEW WITH ADOLF MUSCHG

JUDITH RICKER-ABDERHALDEN

*University of Arkansas*

One of the Swiss authors to have a major impact on German literature since Friedrich Dürrenmatt and Max Frisch is Adolf Muschg, the author of six novels, four collections of short stories, five dramatic works and countless essays. He is the recipient of several prizes, among them the prestigious Hermann Hesse Prize in 1974 for his novel *Albissers Grund*. The enthusiastic response to his Frankfurt lecture series in January-February 1980 confirmed Muschg's popularity as a writer, teacher and aesthete. And yet, in spite of his prestige in Europe, especially in Germany, Adolf Muschg has only very recently begun to attract the attention of American critics and journalists. Although a few of his texts have appeared in English, French, Dutch, Japanese and Polish, the bulk of his work has yet to be translated into English. Nevertheless, Adolf Muschg has made enough of an impact on this side of the Atlantic for his works to be discussed at virtually every major meeting of American Germanists.

In countless thematic and stylistic variations, Muschg depicts the anxieties and frustrations of individuals whose greatest sin is not to have lived, or to have lived merely the life of a spectator. Repressed sensuality and sexuality, hypochondria and its origins, loss of identity and purpose, alienation from self and others are but a few of the recurring themes. Phobias, obsessions and depressions abound in the works of this author who is so obviously acquainted with the latest theories in psychology and who has a keen perception of the vulnerability of modern man. Muschg's texts, even those that are satirical, humorous or tragicomical, are characterized above all by great compassion.

Muschg does not merely take stock of the psychological and physiological ills he encounters. Almost invariably he attempts to

diagnose them, i.e., he searches for their origins. Typically, the pathogenic agent is the society in which the victims live: middle class society in general with all its limitations and constraints, prejudices and taboos, and Swiss society in particular. As sympathetic as the author is in his portrayal of society's casualties, he is uncompromising in his social criticism. In most of his writings, psychological and socio-political concerns are intricately linked. Introspection, if viewed as a first step towards recovery and the transfer of energy from hypochondria to political and social action, is the hard work of politics.

The following works by Adolf Muschg have appeared thus far: *Im Sommer des Hasen* (novel, 1965), *Gegenzauber* (novel, 1967), *Fremdkörper* (short stories, 1968), *Rumpelstilz* (play, 1968), *Das Kerbelgericht* (radio play, 1969), *Mitgespielt* (novel, 1969), *Papierwände* (essays, 1970), *Die Aufgeregten von Goethe* (play, 1971), *Liebesgeschichten* (short stories, 1972), *High Fidelity oder Ein Silberblick* (scenario, 1973), *Albissers Grund* (novel, 1974), *Kellers Abend* (play, 1975), *Von Herwegh bis Kaiseraugst* (essay, 1975), *Entfernte Bekannte* (short stories, 1976), *Gottfried Keller* (literary portrait, 1977), *Noch ein Wunsch* (short story, 1979), *Baiyun oder die Freundschaftsgesellschaft* (novel, 1980), *Besprechungen 1961-1979* (essays, 1980), *Literatur als Therapie? Ein Exkurs über das Heilsame und das Unheilbare* (1981), *Leib und Leben* (short stories, 1982). For complete bibliographic information, see *Über Adolf Muschg*, ed. Judith Ricker-Abderhalden (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1979).

The interview below, translated from German by the interviewer, covers a wide area, including Swiss literature in general, Muschg's works in particular, the author's relationship to other writers, the function of art, and the relationship of literature and therapy.

JR: With a few exceptions, Swiss authors seem to have difficulties in establishing themselves in Germany and abroad. That does not seem to apply in your case. To what do you attribute this?

AM: I was simply lucky. I was fortunate enough to complete my first novel at a time when there was a scarcity of new works in Germany and critics were more inclined to write prompt and favorable reviews. Thus I was able to establish myself in Germany with my very first

novel, *Im Sommer des Hasen*. I realized how fortunate I had been when my subsequent works did not get the same attention. In fact, I was unable to get a similar response in Germany until I started to publish with Suhrkamp. Books published in Switzerland tend to be neglected if not ignored by German reviewers. In recent years, the situation has only worsened. Fine books published by the Zytglogge Verlag in Bern, books that would merit serious consideration, are completely ignored, to cite just one example. The fact that I happened to live in Germany when my first works appeared may have contributed to my initial success. I was perceived as a German, at least in part, although the themes of my books are inescapably Swiss. This early trend continued, which was a great stroke of luck because, as any literary historian will confirm, the fame of Swiss authors is gained or lost in Germany. That certainly was the case in the nineteenth century, and I believe that the situation is no different today.

JR: May I assume, then, that you consciously write for a general German audience?

AM: It is difficult for authors to assess to what extent they are influenced by the existence of a particular readership. When I write, my sole aim is to write as precisely as possible. In other words, I do not write for a specific audience. Not until my manuscript has been submitted do I take cognizance of external factors, such as the perspective of a particular publisher. At that stage, the issue of the audience does enter into the picture, as for example when the editors object to expressions they consider to be Swiss, expressions for which I tend to fight!

JR: Do you have the impression that your works are held in greater esteem in Germany than in your own country?

AM: I started off with an even sales distribution: 50% of my works were sold in Switzerland, 50% abroad. Today approximately 65% are sold abroad, 35% in Switzerland so that I acquired the curious reputation of being a standard-bearer of Swiss literature in Germany. As far as I know I do not wave any flags. That's not my style. But I do have an audience in Switzerland, an audience that in all likelihood has a more intimate understanding of my works than readers abroad, where the cultural premises are, after all, distinctly different.

JR: Don't you think that the somewhat cool reception of your works in some segments of Swiss society may be the result of your critical stance towards Switzerland? Perhaps some Swiss are offended by the social and political criticism evident in many of your works.

AM: Unfortunately, that is what people say. I think, however, that you would be hard pressed to substantiate these claims in my works. What strikes some of my compatriots (at least those who consider themselves Switzerland personified) as unpatriotic in my works is the questioning of facts, the refusal to accept foregone conclusions. I believe this is not just a personal problem but a part of the larger context of contemporary middle-class society in Switzerland.

JR: Was it a consequence of your success in Germany that you have closer contacts with German authors than with your Swiss colleagues? I am very interested in your relationships with Max Frisch, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Günter Grass, Martin Walser, to name just a few.

AM: They belong to different circles of friends, so to speak. Grass and Walser, for instance, have little in common, whereas Walser and Frisch are good friends. I regard myself as akin to Walser, but we are not close friends; I do not regard myself as akin to Frisch, but we are good friends. It's all rather complicated! I get along well with Hildesheimer, Jurek Becker and others. These are friendships I owe to my publisher. The publishing house of Suhrkamp is one of the few institutions on the German cultural scene that treats its authors as individuals. On three to four occasions a year they bring us together. These meetings create bonds that go beyond the professional realm. That strikes me as something very beautiful. It constitutes one of the last reliable cultural milieus in Germany, and there nationality is immaterial. There are a few Swiss authors to whom I feel very close, for example Bichsel and Steiner. In their case it is probably no coincidence that they are Swiss, as Switzerland is definitely one of our frequent topics of conversation. But basically, Switzerland tends to be merely a point of departure leading to more significant matters about which I can relate to Germans equally well, if not better.

JR: Is there still what one might call a Zürich literary scene?

AM: If there is one at all, I am not aware of it. I do live near Zürich, that is true, but today the climate there is not favorable for literature, or else I do great injustice to the city. The reason for this is not just the political climate, but also the particular kind of stand-offishness of the writers in Zürich, myself included. It has always been difficult, even before the youth unrest, to get this handful of writers together in one café—much more difficult than in Bern or in Basel.

JR: A few years ago you mentioned to Rolf Kieser that the USA preoccupied your mind more than any other country on earth, that you professed having “an irritating and fascinating attachment” to it. You indicated that it therefore was potentially a topic for your work. Does this still hold true? May we look forward to a novel about America in the foreseeable future?

AM: I stand by the statement I made to Rolf Kieser, and many Swiss colleagues would certainly concur, at least those who have become Americanized, such as Federspiel, Frisch and, in his own way, even Bichsel. It has to do with the fact that these two versions of democracy—the American one on a large scale and the Swiss one on a small scale—have remained closely bound to one another over the centuries through common expectations and a common perspective. I also stand by the statement that I am keenly and very personally interested in the USA, although that has changed somewhat in recent months. That is not entirely Reagan’s fault. But something approaching a consensus of fear has developed among European intellectuals, a sense of unrequited love, with regard to the role of America. Aren’t we equally at the mercy of both superpowers, even the one bearing our colors? I am talking about a certain emancipation from Big Brother, an emancipation which, at this point, has taken place in spirit only. I sense this increasing emancipation, although it is connected with the fact that a surprisingly large number of Americans (of whom one would have expected better) allowed themselves to be drawn into a conservative nationalistic consensus. They showed little understanding of the current peace movement in Europe, a movement which they perceived as directed against America—which I think is totally wrong. But in the meantime that situation has begun to correct itself. Americans, thank God—and that is the basis for my love of America—have never needed lessons in how to dissent. Dissent has a long and solid tradition in that country, and it is gaining momentum again, with the support of churches, in the struggle for peace. I regard the success of the *Freeze* movement, for instance, as a very positive sign.

JR: Is it true that you are planning to take another trip to Japan?

AM: Yes. This is a Goethe-year, and I was asked to give a series of commemorative lectures in Japan, the country that is most densely populated with Germanists. I look forward to returning to Japan after a 20-year absence.

JR: Has your relationship to Goethe changed significantly over the years?

AM: It has changed, but not on account of the Goethe-year. I have developed a liking for him, something I would not have dreamed of when I was a student studying under Emil Staiger. I was discouraged, in those days, by the intimidating presence of the famous Goethe specialist. I have since figured out Goethe's tricks, above all in his scientific studies. There Goethe raised questions and attempted to provide answers which I consider to be of central importance for the preservation of our planet. His approach to nature is, to use current jargon, "green." He has a well developed respect for nature which seems to date back to medieval if not pagan times. He is convinced that our senses are adequate for the perception of our needs, that they are provided for that purpose, and that our contacts with the phenomena we study and treat must be balanced, indeed that the latter correspond to something within us. According to Goethe, one of the most important prerequisites for any kind of scientific work is sensuality, and that happens to be a word that is sacred to me. Although many of Goethe's theories have proven to be scientifically wrong, I consider Goethe's overall approach to nature life-saving. Since I have become a writer myself, my respect for Goethe's achievements and methods has increased steadily. I know of no one writing in German who has written a work that even comes close to his novel *Wahlverwandtschaften*. The *Wanderjahre* too was quite a discovery for me. I even wrote a short postscript to the new edition of the *Wanderjahre* published by Insel.

JR: Judging from your play *Die Aufgeregten von Goethe*, you are less enthusiastic about Goethe's comedy about the French revolution.

AM: That was part of my Oedipal phase during which I had to break away from Goethe. Actually, I fought against a certain Goethe image that was popular among Germanists who lacked a deeper appreciation of Goethe's idiosyncrasies, especially with regard to the French Revolution. Today, I dare say that I have better insights into these problems.

JR: Some critics claimed that you did Goethe an injustice in that play. Do you find that criticism valid today, roughly ten years after you wrote the play?

AM: I guess I made an attempt to answer Goethe in the spirit of Büchner or Brecht, and that seemed to be an appropriate response at the time. It is not something that would interest me today. Since I share his glass house, I no longer feel the same temptation to cast stones.

JR: In one of your recent publications, *Literatur als Therapie?*, you seem to dissociate yourself from your earlier support of the New Left. You now suspect, you wrote, that the hope for social change then “was an expression of inadequate self-assessment,” and that you had overestimated the efficacy of literature. Is there a shift in emphasis in your most recent works from political to psychological concerns?

AM: I hope not! If anything, I now believe that my willingness to recognize problems was not radical enough at the time by a long shot. When I say that the political activity and the political demonstrations were a flight forwards, I mean that the whole basis for social change was not solid enough, neither my own personal basis nor that of the protest movement as a whole. In other words, we were not thorough enough; we projected our own psychological problems [into the world]. I believe that the whole class conflict phase was naive and basically unpolitical and, to a certain degree, self-contradictory through its almost total lack of commitment and awareness on the part of those very social strata theoretically to be reached and mobilized. Today the opposite is true: the people who are beginning to deal with their own emotional needs are inspiring many other people and therefore are accomplishing significantly more. Just think of the demonstrations in Kaiseraugst, Startbahn West, of the peace movement. These are individuals who have learned to be dissatisfied with themselves and to no longer view this discontent as something private, but as something (and this seems to me to be a central point) that can be shared with others. They do not simply blame the system. They are able to listen and hear, they are able to perceive the needs of others. And out of the common need for changes—experienced, not merely rationalized in common—a movement is growing that has a chance to bring about real changes. There is no doubt in my own mind that changes are needed, to a much greater extent than in 1968. It has become a matter of life and death for our entire civilization. The suicidal components cannot be overlooked, and my only criticism of the activists of the sixties is that they were not part of the solution: they

were part of the problem. Providing Marxist analyses of the world simply is not enough to change it; neither is it enough to take to the streets to play hero and get pummeled by water cannons. We must reach people, we must address their shared concerns. The peaceful, gentle "green" approach is more effective. This is not only a purely tactical consideration; it also improves the quality of life. We all made ourselves miserable with our rabid dogmatism.

**JR:** In other words, you still hold out hopes for some kind of progress, you are still confident that social changes will occur.

**AM:** I probably wouldn't use the term "progress" any longer, at least not in the same sense as before. The managers have appropriated progress and taken it and now it's out of control. If the two super-powers, i.e. their leadership, have anything in common at all, it is their virtually undiminished belief in the value of growth, of a growing GNP. Herein lies the main problem for me, to a much greater extent than I realized ten years ago.

**JR:** Isn't there a movement away from politics into the private sphere, in your case and that of many other contemporary writers? The big topics seem to be learning to accept oneself, living a full life, taking one's needs seriously. To me this looks like an escape from politics.

**AM:** I repeat, the very opposite is true. Individuals who take their own needs seriously cannot be misused to serve the needs of politicians. It is an immunization process. Let us take an absurd phenomenon like the war in the Falkland Islands. If there had been a clearer understanding of Great Britain's real needs, a kind of understanding of oneself that was immune to clichés of national interest, then the British fleet would never have put to sea. People would have laughed themselves silly every time the national anthem was struck up. People who are aware of their real needs tend to be more courageous, more rebellious, even in the public sector. They are less corruptible than the flag wavers of every persuasion, including the left.

**JR:** You mentioned at one point that only that which is private creates bonds between the readers and the author. Doesn't the author sometimes run the risk of indiscretion? Terms such as narcissism are occasionally applied to your own works. How, or perhaps when, do private matters become compelling?

AM: That is really a question for the readers. It should be the author's working hypothesis not to worry about narcissism. That works for me. I am not in favor of narcissism. Narcissism has become fashionable and has been blamed on our upbringing; to that extent one need not be ashamed of it. Most productive behavior, even altruistic behavior, has been brewed in the witch's cauldron of narcissism, not of static but of conquered, overcome, transformed narcissism, to be sure. People should not be afraid that the necessary result of self-revelation is self-centeredness. For me, the exact opposite is true, and I had this experience not only while writing, but in group therapy. People seldom really talk about themselves. That is something they have never learned to do, something that requires a lot of real courage, something they rarely even do in the privacy of their own homes. But when they do reveal their innermost thoughts, they need not be afraid of being misunderstood. On the contrary. Only the language of individuals who are willing to talk about their own suffering and their own shortcomings is perceived by others as evidence of solidarity. To be sure, I have experienced that in a special situation, but I have experienced it in such a way that I never want to forget it. Whenever I feel tempted to play little games, to project a certain image of myself, to make myself out to be something I am not, I realize that I am lying much more, fooling myself much more, and reducing the contact with the others to a much greater extent than if I express my true feelings. Of course when I write, the situation is much more complicated. The openness that is possible in therapy can never be achieved in the process of writing. I myself did not pass the test in front of the mirror that I recommended to the students in my Frankfurt lecture series. Instead, I wrote the short story about Raimund in the anthology *Leib und Leben*.

JR: Isn't the hide-and-seek game which you just described the basis for much of your writing?

AM: I think so. In a sense, that is the opposite charge. Some say, "How can you reveal so much of yourself?" Others ask: "Why do you always disguise yourself?" Perhaps both are right. Every costume party shows (and I really believe this) that an individual's mask, even if it is relatively expressionless, often is much more revealing than the everyday mask one wears.

JR: If I understand you correctly, writing for you is a labor of love and

a labor of mourning. These terms "Liebesmühe" and "Trauerarbeit" seem to appear more and more frequently in your work.

AM: For now I would like to get away from these terms. Writing for me is a pleasure and an adventure. Recently, when I started writing a short story, something quite extraordinary happened: I myself was in suspense about the outcome! The feeling that a text has acquired its own life is not unlike the feeling of putting out to sea, fearing the wind and the weather, but saying: Well, let's see what will come of this!

JR: Literature then as a kind of game.

AM: Yes, a game, but a game of life and death. It is not a matter of life and death as for instance on a sea voyage, but it concerns life itself, step by step. I believe I notice now when a lifeless word comes from a pen. To my great relief I have observed that I write very slowly now. I used to write terrifically rapidly, and then I simply revised everything. Now I prefer to remain very close to the matter like a sculptor who has to chisel carefully, one stroke at a time, and who cannot complete his creation quickly and return to it later to rework it. That simply does not work. I am really starting to chisel and carve. You are getting a completely new image of me. You know, labor of mourning, that is true, too, it can't be denied. But a period of mourning should not last more than three years, or else it becomes offensive.

JR: In your recent work *Literatur als Therapie* you dealt extensively with the relationship between literature and therapy.

AM: Question mark!

JR: Yes, question mark: *Literatur als Therapie*? And there you came to the conclusion that literature is not therapy, neither for the writer nor for the reader.

AM: Yes, but in the case of the reader, I do not want to state it so categorically. In the case of the writer, I am quite certain, not from personal experience, but from literary history. At least as far as German literature is concerned, there are not many individuals who were unhappier than the writers. Even economically privileged writers managed to ruin themselves. But the situation is different when it comes to the reader, and that aspect I have neglected because of the

conception of my book, intentionally. I decided to write from the viewpoint of a writer, not a reader. Any book I might write about the same topic from the reader's perspective would have to be quite different. Literary language has had a therapeutic effect on me too, above all Goethe's works which we just mentioned. These experiences enable me to go on with life, they help me get through the day more easily, and they enable me to find new ways to relate to others.

JR: You once described writing as perilous and the writer as incurable, in *Literatur als Therapie*? These are, in a way, preconditions for the writer's productivity, aren't they? While reading your essay, I was reminded very strongly of Thomas Mann and his concept of illness.

AM: Yes, he wrestled for a long time with his illnesses!

JR: Do you believe that the existential peril of the writer is a precondition for writing per se?

AM: Yes, I do believe that writing is perilous, but I am not sure that we should feed the myths about it. After all, this condition is not restricted to writers. And it still is a privilege (which Goethe described in an unforgettable sentence) that God has granted the artists—in contradistinction to teenagers, fixers, punks and other less privileged people—a means of expressing their suffering. To say it bluntly, the existential peril of the writer is still a luxury and, to a considerable extent, self-imposed. Most authors are, in my opinion, addicted to writing, in the way that drug addicts are addicted to their drugs. In that sense the act of writing is not voluntary. And yet it is something I deliberately choose again and again, with each new book. I cannot help it. Greater authors than I have stopped writing. Hölderlin stopped; Robert Walser stopped. Every writer gets to a point where he says to himself: This is no life! I do not want to continue living like this! Either he goes to a nursing home or he pretends to be mad. In view of such biographies, we must come up with new definitions of normality and madness, and not make the mistake of condemning Hölderlin from the vantage point of our psychiatric institutions.

JR: A "new" form of suffering seems to be appearing more and more frequently in literature: cancer, the fear of cancer. Is this in fact a new topic in literature? Has cancer become a metaphor, a myth, so to speak?

AM: Leaving aside the clinical definition, for the moment, we could say that cancer is the fear that a part of me has become independent and begun to devour me. Viewed like that, the fear of cancer seems to be a special form of a well-rounded fear that in my short life I will not have a chance to develop myself, that I will be robbed of myself, that I will stand in my own way. It is no longer a clinical diagnosis. Indeed, in her book *Illness as A Metaphor*, Susan Sontag has examined the attempt to transform cancer into a metaphor, an attempt which is compelling, but in the last analysis is doomed to failure in the face of the experience of real cancer patients and real illness. For my part, I would rather not go her way (if I were in her situation) and rationalize cancer away as a *fable convenue* or some collective fiction. I cannot formulate this in a medically plausible way, but I strongly suspect that cancer has something to do with the fact that someone is unwilling to let go of his tensions, for fear of trading them for something even worse, and that "something worse" is different for every individual.

JR: That certainly was true in the case of Fritz Zorn's *Mars*, wasn't it?

AM: Yes, of course. Actually, in his case, cancer probably was the precondition for his productivity, but it would be much too naive to say: The poor fellow died of cancer and still was able to wring this book out of his disease. In fact, it is the other way around. His cancer finally permitted him to cry out what he had bottled up inside himself, something he knew he had to get rid of.

JR: Is it really true that you are asked about Fritz Zorn's *Mars* most often?

AM: After it appeared, I received letters for years, lots of letters in which I was thought to have had access to privileged information regarding *Mars*' situation, which I did not have, as I hardly knew more than the readers, and for a while there was the curious suspicion that I may have written the book myself.

JR: Yes, I have heard that, too.

AM: Had I written a book with this topic, I certainly would not have used a pen name. I would not have concealed my identity, or else the entire enterprise would have been senseless. The response this book found provided me with invaluable, though discomfoting insights into

myself and has made me uneasy about my original enthusiastic endorsement of the book.

JR: At one point you indicated that today you would write a different foreword to *Mars*.

AM: That is correct. At that time, I did it more or less as a favor for the publisher who assumed that the moderately famous Muschg might be able to lend a hand to a totally obscure high school teacher. Of course, that turned out to be an error, but no one could have foreseen that at the time. It was assumed the book would have no chance to find a publisher. And it is rather strange that much more powerful books about the same topic, for instance Maja Beutler's novel *Fuss fassen* about her own illness, not even remotely approached *Mars*' success.

JR: What do you think of Matthias Diggelmann's *Schatten. Tagebuch einer Krankheit*?

AM: In Diggelmann's case, there might have been an added measure of morbid fascination with the text because it was written by an established author: This is his last book! But, to get back to *Mars*, no one suspected that the first and only book that is so diffuse about the author's real concerns, which is really a rather puerile and immature treatise about God and the world, no one suspected that such a book would be so immensely popular, and precisely for the qualities stated above. It was most successful in France, not in Germany. In America, it received mixed reviews. I read a very positive review in *Time Magazine* and a negative, not very empathetic (actually arrogant) one in the *New York Times*.

JR: At least in *Literatur als Therapie*? you seem to attach a lot of importance to *Mars*. You maintain that it captured not only the mood of an entire generation, but also took the measure of an entire culture. Isn't that rather extreme?

AM: Yes, I need to be more precise. I meant that *Mars* has a lot to do with the youth movement and that the youth movement in turn has a lot to do with problems that society as a whole represses. In this sense, I consider *Mars* to be a sign of its time. That may not be apparent on the surface. Socially, educationally and rhetorically *Mars* does not belong in the company of the Zürich youth movement. But it does

belong, from the point of view of its diagnosis if you look beneath the surface, when you look into the deeper silence concealed by rhetoric, a silence which for today's youth is silence in the face of our society. But in reality the young people are not at all inarticulate, they are, in their own way, highly articulate. Their graffiti are much wittier than all of the political slogans combined. Their only response to this society is either the shout of rhetoric or the bad joke. *Mars* is representative of this culture in so far as his cancer diagnoses the great failures of the society as a whole, its lack of vitality, its hostility to living.

JR: I believe you mentioned that in essence art and therapy have the same goal: to enable individuals to live fully. At this point they coincide. Hasn't this always been one of the key themes in your works, but one you have only recently begun to articulate clearly?

AM: That may very well be the case. But it takes a long time for some concepts to mature. Before they are ready to be put on paper, we encounter them now and then in the disguised form of the characters we create. Sometimes we make all sorts of rash statements that we are unable yet to combine into a coherent statement. As far as the slim volume *Literatur als Therapie?* is concerned, it is by far the most difficult text I have ever written.

JR: One last question about your relationship to your own works. You mentioned once that artists tend either to idolize or to disavow their own works. Which texts do you consider today to be your best, and which—although I hesitate to use the word—do you consider least successful? Perhaps I should ask: From which works have you distanced yourself most in recent years?

AM: I too prefer to use the term "distance" instead of "unsuccessful" and "successful." It is easier for me to indicate to which works I am closest. I frequently have to reestablish that. I do not often have occasion to reread my works. But every now and then, for instance when there is going to be a new edition, I want to correct something, and I start to reread. Then it can happen that I shudder and ask myself: How could you write that! The question really needs to be answered empirically, i.e., I have to mention those works that are most important to me because I happen to identify with them most. I guess for me "Brämis Aussicht" in *Entfernte Bekannte* and "Ein

Glockenspiel" in my new collection of short stories, *Leib und Leben*, are most important. They are farthest removed from any kind of slickness and from the suspicion that they are outgrowths of some superficial exercises in creative writing. In these two stories I stayed close to the vital center of the subject, not knowing where it would lead. In other words, these are the two of my short stories that mean most to me. It is harder for me to judge the longer texts because in every novel there are passages which in my view are not very successful. Now I too used that word!

JR: The term "virtuosity" has been applied to your writing style. Do you try to avoid it?

AM: You always have to look at the persons who use the word "virtuosity," and you have to figure out what they mean by it. Generally, it is a derogatory term, at least here. I still believe that a text is never good enough, can never be good enough. But when virtuosity means that we are constantly aware of the author's presence behind his words, then I would prefer to have less of this virtuosity. Naturally, there are great works of literature, for instance in the case of Robert Walser, where the author is constantly felt as he manipulates texts by adding here, taking away there. But that is probably not at all what people mean when they use the word "virtuosity." When I try to define the term and apply it to something I dislike in my own works, then I would say that it is the attempt to divert the reader's attention through language or through verbal devices, to divert attention from the actual question at issue and can only be such if language and its object are inseparable. If language and its object are incongruent, then "virtuosity" is indeed an invective.

JR: One last question. Again and again, historical figures fascinated and challenged you. I am thinking of Goethe, Herwegh, Keller and others. Is there someone, today, in whom you are particularly interested?

AM: Historical in the broadest possible sense. Yes, I am preoccupied right now with the story of the Dutch forger Han van Meegeren, who copied Vermeer's paintings, i.e., he created Vermeer paintings that never existed and which the art historians purchased from him as genuine Vermeers. That is a man to whom I would like to devote some attention. But that is probably not exactly what you mean by

historical figures, because van Meegeren worked in the thirties and forties of our century. An author about whom I would like to write a book some day—a proper germanistic study, perhaps not a scholarly book, but one that is genuinely sympathetic—is Wolfram von Eschenbach. I have turned into an avid and committed *Parzival*-reader, and right now I consider it to be the single most important book in German literature. It contains more about me than any other book and much that is of importance to us. It is a book of wisdom.