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I. Pessimism as *Zeitgeist*

Beginning in the 1860s, and lasting until the end of the 19th century, the dark cloud of pessimism hung thick over Germany. This bleak and black mood spread far and wide. It was not confined to second-hand aristocratic circles; it could also be found in the middle classes, among students at universities, workers in factories, and even pupils in gymnasia.¹ Pessimism soon became fashionable, the talk of the town, the theme of literary salons.² There were several anthologies of aphorisms and verse to indulge one's melancholy on any occasion.³

The Germans had a word for this mood: *Weilschmerz*. It meant literally "worldpain", and it signifies a mood of weariness or sadness about life arising from the acute awareness of evil and suffering. Its origins have been traced back to the 1830s, to the late Romantic era, to the works of Jean Paul, Heinrich Heine, N. Lenau, G. Eickow, C. D. Grabbe and K. L. Immermann.⁴ By the 1860s the word had an ironic, even derogatory meaning, implying extreme or affected sensitivity to the evil and suffering in the world. As later in that decade the word also began to acquire a broader more serious meaning, it was no longer just a poet's personal mood; it was a public state of mind, the spirit of the age, the *Zeitgeist*.⁵

The origins of this *Weilschmerz* are patchy. There seems to be no straightforward social or historical cause for it. Indeed, from a broad historical perspective, the second

¹ On the spread of pessimism among all social classes, see Theodor Feucht, *Der Pessimismus* (Kritische Gesamtausgabe des Pessimismus, 1876), pp. 8–9.

² On the reception of pessimism in the salons, see Carl Heyroldts, *Salons und Saloniers, Saloniersleben im 19ten Jahrb.* (Berlin: Carl Duncker, 1863), p. 21. In the social satire by M. Raymond, *Die Salons des Pessimismus und insbesondere Herr Meyer* (Bonn: Proben & Co., 1879), Herr Meyer and his wife hold a salon in which the pessimists are invited and hold court.

³ See Otto Feiniger, ed., *Pessimisten-Gesellschaft* (München: C. C. Brun's Verlag, 1884); Max Seifing, ed., *Wörter der pessimistischen Weltanschauung* (München: T. Ackermann, 1888); and Eduard Feiler, ed., *Wörter der Weilschmerz* (Leipzig: Wigand, 1897).

⁴ On the etymology of the word, see W. Neack, "Weilschmerz," in: *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. Joachim Ritter, Karlfried Gründer and Gottfried Gabriel (Basel: Schwabe, 2014), XII, 214–15.

⁵ On pessimism as the mood of the age, see Julius Duhon, *Wörter über Zeitgeist in Deutschland* (Leipzig: Otto Wigand, 1897), 1, 79–101; and Georg Peter Weygoldt, *Kritik der philosophischen Anschauung der neuesten Zeit* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1875), p. 15.