



Ernst Keller
(1931–2006)

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Ernst Keller died suddenly on 27 November 2006 in Greven near Münster in Westphalia, without any advance signs of what was to come, a healthy man at seventy-five. ‘Lord, grant to each of us our unique death, / a dying that rounds off a single life / in which we knew love, meaning, bitterness’, three lines by Rainer Maria Rilke in which he tried to make sense of the inexplicable. But Ernst Keller was not a Rilke scholar; he was more interested in matters on which Rilke’s poetry or prose has little to say. Throughout his life, Keller’s thinking revolved around politics, or, more precisely, around the point where culture and politics converge and where political issues impinge on literary works, thus raising challenging issues of moral responsibility. Ernst Keller was a moralist in the best sense of the word and he loathed corruption wherever he saw it, whether in political or academic life. What nevertheless brings Rilke’s words to mind is the sad fact that his death prevented Ernst Keller from ‘rounding off’ his life, that is from the completion of his last project, which had occupied him for more than a decade and which would have been the crowning achievement of his career as a scholar.

Already in his book on *Nationalism and Literature*, published in 1970, the figure of Ernst Jünger played a dominant role. Jünger, a highly decorated officer in the German army during the First World War, had later become a writer of distinction, but remained a controversial figure because of his right-wing leanings. However, he despised Hitler as coarse and vulgar – a not uncommon attitude among elitist conservative intellectuals in the Germany of those times. During the Second World War, Jünger, again an officer in the German army and stationed in occupied Paris, had maintained some connections to the Resistance there and it was this especially that attracted Ernst Keller to him once more. He began his final research project soon after the completion of his study on Lukács and in 2006 the work was nearing completion. Only the introduction and conclusion had still to be written. The main body of the book, at least, is in the hands of a publisher and should become accessible before long.

Ernst Keller grew up in a small township in northern Switzerland, not far from the German border; he was born on 18 September 1931 in Dübendorf near Zürich. We first met in our early Melbourne days and he was the first Swiss I got to know well. Ernst had arrived here in 1961 to take up a lectureship in German at Monash University, two years after I had started in the German Department at Melbourne. He had studied German Language and Literature as well as British and American History at Zürich University and completed his doctorate there, a thesis on Franz Werfel's 'Concept of Humanity', a thoroughly political topic, supervised by the then famous scholar Emil Staiger, whose apolitical approach to literature and aura of superiority went very much against the grain to Ernst Keller. A year as *Dozent* at the German Goethe Institute in Cairo followed, before he settled in Australia. We were both thirty when we arrived here and thus belonged to the same generation and we shared a lot of interests. German was our native language; yet, the early parts of our lives had been considerably different. I grew up in a country plunged into the hysteria of fierce nationalism and soon at war with most of the world. Ernst Keller, on the other hand, had spent his childhood in peace, though with a boy's curiosity as to what was happening on the other side of Lake Constance. A certain fascination with warfare could thus develop, but the events destroying much of Europe remained at a distance and did not threaten him. And this distance was maintained when he became interested in the ambiguities of German culture. He could acknowledge this culture as his own, but he could also enjoy studying it without feeling guilt for heinous crimes committed in its name. He could, for instance, simply enjoy Richard Wagner's operas, something that was difficult for me to share for many years because of Wagner's appalling anti-Semitism.

His critical fascination with German culture and history became the lifelong focus of Ernst Keller's research. In 1965 he published his study *The Non-political German* on Thomas Mann's book *Considerations of a Non-political Mind*, which appeared at the end of the First World War. Keller showed Mann in this phase of his career as a herald of conservatism, by virtue of his untenable distinction between culture and civilisation, before he turned away from this dangerous path, left Germany in 1933 and, from his Swiss and later American exile, became one of the most prominent and outspoken critics of the Nazi regime. For Ernst Keller the study of Thomas Mann was, in a sense, an overture to his own major work, his book on *Nationalism and Literature*, with the subtitle *Langemarck – Weimar – Stalingrad* – three places symbolic of three stages on Germany's path to self-destruction. The book is an erudite history of German nationalism and conservatism in the first half of the twentieth century, beginning with the German dissident and idealistic youth movement around 1900, the guitar-strumming *Wandervögel*, who then died on the battlefields of the First World War, such as Langemarck in Flanders, singing 'Deutschland, Deutschland über alles'. Weimar, on the other hand, the city where Goethe had lived and died, stood for the futile attempt to establish democracy in Germany in the name of its older cultural heritage: the 'Weimar Republic', which was given its constitution there in 1919. And Stalingrad then signifies the end of all German aspirations towards superiority and dominance

over other nations. The literary works of Theodor Plievier, Anna Seghers and Ernst Jünger are emblematic of this in the last chapter of the book. A Polish reviewer wrote at the time that Keller ‘possesses the ability to extract from literature the pertinent problems of politics, morality and ethics and uses them to elucidate the specifics of the German mentality and present a significant part of German intellectual life with deep understanding and the knowledge of a discoverer.’

Six years later, in 1976, Ernst Keller published his book on *The Critical Mind*, a history of German literary criticism from Lessing to Börne, focusing on the transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, the period when German literature and literary criticism gradually became recognised internationally. In 1984 Ernst Keller’s subtle analysis of the origins and early writings of the Hungarian philosopher and literary critic Georg Lukács appeared, another of those figures that moved between political extremes. In Lukács’s case the path led from conservatism to membership of the Communist Party.

In the meantime, Ernst Keller had been promoted to senior lecturer, had been elected to the Academy in 1978 and finally, in 1985, received a readership at Monash, from which he retired at the end of 1994. In 1997 he and his wife moved to Greven in northern Germany, where Rosemarie Keller was at home. Ernst traveled to France several times and took up courses in French there in order to be able to read some original documents concerning Jünger in Paris, until the teacher refused him further tuition: Ernst had already been completely fluent in French since his school days. He would not have read Corneille, Diderot or Voltaire in translation. But he was a perfectionist and could not believe that there was nothing more to learn.

It was a perfectionism which had its origins in great humility. There was even some deep-rooted shyness in him, hidden behind a certain frankness and candour, because he was quite unable to conceal his opinions behind a screen of smiling politeness. So he would have offended some, while to others he may at times have appeared to be an ascetic, partly because of his great self-discipline, partly because of a certain austerity in his lifestyle – a childhood as the son of an innkeeper had left him with a life long distaste for alcohol and tobacco. But those who had the great pleasure and distinction of becoming his friends knew his tenderness at heart and his great kindness.

Gerhard Schulz