



Gero von Wilpert
(1933–2009)

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The news of Gero von Wilpert's death on 24 December 2009 at his home in Werrington County reached us in Australia via the internet first, which transmitted his obituaries from national and regional German papers. Always modest and inclined towards understatement and an often sparkling self-irony, he would have accepted this as a form of penalty for not having started his career in Australia straightaway. To publish in languages other than English inevitably restricts public attention to where these other languages are spoken and read. And ever since his first book, *Sachwörterbuch der deutschen Literatur*, his dictionary of literary terminology, Gero von Wilpert found this attention wherever in the world German is spoken and taught. It is a reference work relevant to the whole range of German literary history and to literary criticism. It was first published in 1955 and is now in its eighth edition, revised and enlarged to one thousand pages, double the original size, and indispensable for generations of students and teachers of German.

Surprisingly, Gero von Wilpert was twenty-two when he single-handedly wrote this book, which established his scholarly reputation. This generally is an age when students learn to use such instruments of learning, but Gero von Wilpert had always been an exceptional personality. Other reference works followed: in 1958 the day-by-day chronology of the life and works of Friedrich Schiller (*Schiller-Chronik*), the playwright, poet and philosopher, born in 1759 near Stuttgart, where Gero was living at the time – it recently appeared in a new edition. In 1967 he published a fundamental reference work for scholars, bibliographers and librarians entitled *Erstausgaben deutscher Dichtung* (First Editions of German Literature). This he had put together with Adolf Gühring, and in 1968 for his *Lexikon der Weltliteratur* (Lexicon of World Literature) he engaged more than three hundred expert contributors: the logistics must have been an excruciating task in itself. It represents an encyclopaedia of world literature in two volumes and runs to more than 3,000 pages, divided into biographical entries and entries on individual works, a monumental enterprise and masterpiece of scholarly strategy, in which Gero never ceased to remain

the team leader, regarding himself as the editor-in-chief responsible for every single entry. This work too has achieved several editions, one as a paperback in four volumes, and later electronically as a CD.

Gero von Wilpert was born on 13 March 1933 in Dorpat (Tartu), Estonia, a region particularly vulnerable to the vagaries of history. The German minority of administrators and intellectuals in the Baltic states was forced to leave after the beginning of World War II and settled as refugees in northern Germany. There, in Heide in Holstein, Gero went to school; later he studied in Heidelberg. After university he became, in 1957, a publisher's reader with the Alfred Kröner Verlag Stuttgart – a publishing house which up to the present day specialises in reference works. It was here where he wrote his *Sachwörterbuch* and all the other dictionaries, handbooks and lexica which made him widely known. He once told me that, on a trip to Germany, when he was checking into a hotel in Göttingen, a young desk clerk looked up from his computer, astonished and incredulous, asking him: 'Are you really THE Wilpert?' Gero von Wilpert had, indeed, become an institution, a legendary figure.

The immense success of his books did not prevent Gero from becoming tired of the daily routine and the commercial considerations of a publisher's business. Access to a university, as an alternative, however, was blocked to him by the rigid hierarchical system of German universities. Although thousands of PhD students all over the world had completed their theses and hundreds of professors prepared their lectures and seminars with the assistance of Wilpert's books, he himself did not possess a doctorate. So when in 1972 the University of New South Wales advertised a lectureship in German, he applied, and the university was liberal enough to recognise his scholarly reputation, appoint the man and disregard the title that did not exist. Gero von Wilpert came to Sydney and immediately took up work on a doctoral dissertation on the motif of the lost shadow from Lucian and Dante to Chamisso, Hofmannsthal and Hans Christian Andersen – *Der verlorene Schatten. Varianten eines literarischen Motivs* (1978), a brilliant display of his encyclopaedic knowledge of world literature, written with circumspection, ease and a dash of irony. With his Australian doctorate, he had also found the academic shadow for himself.

Gero von Wilpert committed himself wholeheartedly to Australia and established himself with Margret and their three sons in Werrington House within the wide-open space of Werrington County, with a view to the Blue Mountains. Late in 1980 Gero von Wilpert was appointed to the Chair of German at Sydney University and in 1983 elected a Fellow of the Academy. He is remembered as the tall gentleman dressed in style, with an ever-present sense of humour and ready for witty or ironic remarks, but also a genuine humility, although occasions to meet and enjoy him there became rarer with his failing health.

In 1993, Gero von Wilpert retired to Werrington. Any guest would find him in his study on the first floor, the desk clear and polished, free from any files, folders,

papers, only a small computer in a drawer. There he sat, never giving the impression of being busy, surrounded by his library of thousands of books which all looked new and untouched, not spoiled by the untidiness of bookmarks or off-prints. His memory, which could dispense with such little tools whereby we tend to support our reading, must have been astounding. He gave me proof of this in a particular case. He presented me with a copy of his encyclopaedia of world literature with the dedication 'as a token that I have a good command of the alphabet'. I have forgotten what prompted this remark, probably some little quibble about the German *umlaut*, e.g. the correct alphabetical sequence of Görres, Goethe and Golding. It was Goethe then which provided me with an almost incredible example of his mastery of 'the alphabet' or, to be more precise, of the strategic command and dominance of his mind over the subject matter.

In 1999 the 150th anniversary of Goethe's birth was due, and Gero von Wilpert decided on producing a *Goethe-Lexicon*, an enormous task, which despite almost two centuries of Goethe scholarship had not been achieved so far. Gero told me of his plan, and also how he intended to proceed. He had made a list of close to 4,000 keywords – persons, places, titles of individual works, literary characters and terms, everything and everybody relevant to Goethe's life, work and thinking, such as: AACHEN, ABEL, ACHILLEIS, ADDISON, ADEL, or: POPE, PORTRAITS OF GOETHE, POTSDAM, POUSSIN, PREUSSEN, PROLOGUE TO FAUST, PROMETHEUS, etc. But it was the first pages of the manuscript, which he sent me later, that surprised me and left me in awe: he had made the astounding decision to proceed with writing the thousands of individual articles in *alphabetical order*, from one keyword to the other instead of bundling the references and writing up en bloc the articles on Goethe's works, his contemporaries, historic events, etc. This method, however, presupposes that the final book of some 1,200 pages already existed in his head, so that in writing he could move easily from one topic to another. In this way an indispensable encyclopaedia on Goethe and his times grew and matured in Werrington House, Australia, in an astoundingly short time. Our first correspondence dates back to October 1995; the book was published in 1998.

But what about the article on Goethe and Australia? It exists, though brief, but is the summary of a lecture which Gero von Wilpert gave at a conference in Sydney in 1999, and published separately in the same year. It notes of course Goethe's knowledge of Captain Cook, Banks and the Forsters, but establishes also that Goethe borrowed in 1816 François Auguste Péron's *Voyage de découvertes aux Terres Australes* from the Weimar Library, first the German translation and later the French original. In 1820 Goethe ordered John Oxley's *Journals of Two Expeditions into the Interior of New South Wales*, and notes in his diary entry of 25 May 1827 that he has sent back to Froriep, a medical practitioner and scientist in Weimar, a – hitherto unidentified – book on Australian volcanoes and later meets in Weimar the brothers Edward Macarthur and James Macarthur from Sydney, Goethe's first Australian visitors. James noted in his diary: 'Tuesday (15 December 1829) called on the celebrated

Göthe a fine venerable looking old man. Very courteous in his manners asked many questions about N.S.W. much pleased when told we had read some of his works in N.S.W.?

Other of his books deserve to be mentioned: his study on the *Die deutsche Gespenstergeschichte* (The German Ghost Story), his *Deutschbaltische Literaturgeschichte* (History of Baltic-German Literature) and most recently the very popular *Die 101 wichtigsten Fragen zu Goethe* (The 101 Most Important Questions on Goethe) (2007), and similarly on Schiller (2009). But he was angry with everything that curtailed this activity. His health failed him several times. 'The legs, the eyes', he wrote to me in April 2009 (it was his last letter to me), 'save me a description of the geography of my sufferings, I can still walk and see and should not complain, considering my age. But if I could only get hold of those people who invented this plan of a "dignified" old age. Quos ego ...!' He died at his home on Christmas Eve 2009, at the age of seventy-six.

Gerhard Schulz