

JOHANNA SPYRI'S *HEIDI*

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Heidi established itself as a children's classic within a few years of its first appearance in 1880–81. By 1884 it had been translated into English, and soon established itself as a firm favourite with that most voracious of reading publics, the British and American middle classes. The success of a children's book depends quite as much on the approval and generosity of parents and relations as on the enthusiastic responses of the young; in their turn, the early readers of *Heidi* bought it for the next generation of children, and this pattern has persisted for over a hundred years. Illustrated editions, abridgements and adaptations have poured from the presses of Germany, Switzerland, Britain and the United States ever since.¹ The 1993 issue of the *Verzeichnis lieferbarer Bücher* (= *German books in print*) lists twelve separate editions and an anthology in which it is included; there are some thirty-five in its English-language counterpart for the same year. It may confidently be claimed that the appearance of *Heidi* added a second Swiss children's classic to the small number of books which genuinely deserve such a description: the other is of course its heartier, more masculine precursor *The Swiss Family Robinson* by the Bernese Protestant parson Johann David Wyss (1743–1818), which was published in Zurich between 1812 and 1817 in a four-volume version prepared by his son Johann Rudolf Wyss under the title *Der Schweizerische Robinson oder Der schiffbrüchige Schweizer-Prediger und seine Familie*, and was translated into English almost immediately. Even today, these two Swiss titles continue to hold their own: they both figure for example in the set of ten children's classics currently published by Parragon [sic] Book Services, Avonmouth. Whether they possess any quality in common which could be described as 'Swiss' is another matter.

The story-line of *Heidi* is familiar enough. An orphan girl, barely five years old, is brought back to her native village in the Alps

¹ More work needs to be done on this subject. The success of *Heidi* in the English-speaking countries has been explored in an unpublished dissertation by Richard Müller, *Heidi oder Der Erfolg eines Schweizer Kinderbuches in angelsächsischen Ländern* (University of Zurich, 1968). Its popularity in other countries, such as Japan (where a 12-volume edition of Spyri's works appeared in 1960–61), would be a chapter in itself.



Doctor from Frankfurt Visits Heidi and Her Grandfather in the Alps

(From *Heidi kann brauchen, was es gelernt hat*, 4th impression
(Gotha: F.A. Perthes, 1885))

by an aunt and is entrusted to the care of her grandfather, a crusty widower living in a mountain hut. After some time the aunt arranges for Heidi to go to Frankfurt in Germany to act as a companion for Klara Sesemann, a well-to-do but sickly child who is some four years older than Heidi. But Heidi is unable to settle in the Sesemann household and becomes increasingly home-sick, until finally Herr Sesemann takes the family doctor's advice and returns her to her grandfather, whom she reconciles to village life. Some time later, in the second part of the story, the family doctor arrives to see how Heidi is getting on. The grandfather decides to move down into the village to enable her to attend school. When Klara pays her return visit to Heidi, her search for health and happiness is rewarded, and in the pure air of the mountains she regains the ability to walk.

It may be wrong to look for patterns of causality and deep-seated symbolism in a story aimed at young readers the age of its protagonist Heidi and her friend Klara. On the other hand, though Sarah Elbert observes that 'children's fiction was a reliable source of income for women writers in mid-century', Heidi was not written to earn its author easy money by conforming to conventional expectations.² Johanna Spyri (1827–1901) had already gained a modest reputation with *Verirrt und gefunden* (*Lost and found*), a set of stories published anonymously by C. Ed. Müller of Bremen in 1873, and with her first two sets of stories, 'for children and those who love children', namely *Heimatlos* (1878; 'All alone in the world') and *Aus Nah und Fern* (1879; 'From near and far'), both of which appeared, again anonymously, with F.A. Perthes of Gotha, a publishing house to which she was to remain loyal for the rest of her career and which published all but six of her forty-nine stories. The novel which made her name in the German-speaking world, and soon spread her fame to Britain and the United States, had no direct or obvious model. There were children's stories in other languages which had already exploited similar contrasts between poverty and richness and between town and country, but there is no reason to suppose that she was influenced by them. It is true that in *Clovernook, or Recollections of our neighborhood in the west* (1852) and its two sequels,³ Alice Cary (1820–71) had made the contrast between urban security or restriction and the invigorating freedom of the untamed countryside and the open air her fundamental theme. But though *Heidi* may be in line with best-selling works such as *Clovernook*, the qualities which give it its characteristic flavour are unique. They

² Sarah Elbert, *A hunger for home: Louisa May Alcott and 'Little women'* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 141.

³ *Clovernook*, a collection of sketches and short narratives rather than a sustained story, ran to five editions in Britain and was followed by a second series in 1853 and by its sequels *Clovernook children* (1855) and *Pictures of country life* (1859).

may be easy enough to sense, but it is in the very nature of Spyri's text that they are remarkably hard to define.

To the English-speaking child or adult reader, *Heidi's* appeal lies mainly in its treatment of a topos which had already been developed by American authors of children's fiction, but which Spyri successfully and skilfully fuses with a memorably vivid evocation of a uniquely attractive setting, the Swiss Alps. To the readers of its earliest translations into English, *Heidi* represented a fresh new literary landscape which their parents were just beginning to discover for themselves in the increasing numbers which Switzerland's rapidly developing railway network and tourist infrastructure were making possible, or for which suitable substitutes were being discovered and developed nearer home. Indeed it may claim to be the first major best-selling work of fiction to place the Swiss alpine landscape at the centre of attention.

To its German readers, the new Swiss novel published by Perthes was also the revelation of a landscape: one more familiar perhaps, but still uncommon in children's fiction. And they, too, must have responded readily to its delicate blend of sentiment and sound common sense. But underlying the German text Spyri wrote, and evident in a way which its English versions minimize or conceal, is Spyri's serious, indeed ambitious sense of literary as well as moral purpose. The *Heidi* known to today's readers in the English-speaking countries is a children's story in twenty-three chapters. The German original, however, is divided into two volumes which were published separately and anonymously by F.A. Perthes of Gotha in 1880 and 1881, each with its own distinctive title. Volume I, which includes Heidi's arrival in the mountains and the Frankfurt episode, and ends with her safe return to the mountains, is called *Heidi's Lehr- und Wanderjahre*; volume II, which brings Klara to Dörfli and is slightly shorter, is entitled *Heidi kann brauchen, was es gelernt hat*. Louise Winsor Brooks (1835–92), Heidi's first translator, retained Spyri's titles in the first American edition of her version (Boston: De Wolfe, Fiske, 1884) by calling it *Heidi: the years of wandering and learning*, but applied it to both volumes. In the first British edition of her version (which appeared the same year), the two volumes are entitled *Heidi's early experiences* and *Heidi's later experiences*, a solution which overlooks something which is central to a fuller understanding of Spyri's intentions as a writer.⁴ Her German title for the first volume of her masterpiece clearly locates it

⁴ Helen B. Dole is more accurate. The two parts of her translation (Boston: Ginn & Co, 1899) are entitled *Heidi's years of learning and travel* and *Heidi makes use of what she has learnt*. The Dole version has much to recommend it, and has been frequently reprinted. She was responsible for what almost amounts to a complete Spyri in English: the 1920s were particularly rich in translations from her pen, culminating in *Castle Wonderful* (1928), a translation of Spyri's later children's novel *Schloß Wildenstein* (Gotha: Perthes, 1892).

within the continuum of nineteenth-century German literature. Volume I, which ends with Heidi's return to her grandfather and his reconciliation with his neighbours in the village community, is given a heavily loaded title which immediately distinguishes Spyri's narrative from the ordinary run of fiction for girls. By calling it *Heidi's Lehr- und Wanderjahre*, Spyri makes clear and explicit reference to the major example of the novel genre in German, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, which its author worked at from 1777 to 1829 and which consists of two vast and almost self-contained novels respectively entitled *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* and *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*.⁵ Goethe's narrative masterpiece is the towering example of a type of novel which it did much to promote as the highest and most ambitious variety of the genre: the *Bildungsroman*, 'in which the chief character, after a number of false starts and wrong choices, is led to follow the right path and to develop into a mature and well-balanced man'.⁶ Was it temerity on Spyri's part to set herself a similar aim on the humbler level of children's literature? Or was she right in thinking that it was possible to generate a similar momentum and a comparable sense of life and understanding unfolding simultaneously within the compass of her young readers' imaginative understanding? To a compatriot of Rousseau and Pestalozzi the challenge was a comprehensible one, though artistically daunting. The two great educationalists had laid stress on the centrality of childhood in the development of the mature human being and, in doing so, had argued that the experiences of childhood, though conventionally ignored and forgotten – at least on the conscious level – are the factors which actively shape the development of the emergent adult. But Spyri took a bolder step than her Swiss precursor Pestalozzi by centring her attention on a girl protagonist and, moreover, one who does not belong to the same broad middle class to which the majority of her potential young readers belonged and which therefore provided the young heroines of most Victorian fiction for girls. Instead she looked elsewhere, and drew her literary inspiration from a genre which had started to loom large in German literature from the early 1840s, the *Dorfgeschichte* or novel of peasant or village life. She may well have drawn inspiration from some of the stories of her compatriot Jeremias Gotthelf and, especially, from Berthold Auerbach, the south German author of the *Schwarzwälder*

⁵ The two parts of Goethe's novel had been translated into English by Thomas Carlyle as *Wilhelm Meister's apprenticeship* and *Wilhelm Meister's travels* in 1824 and 1827 respectively. The combined names of Carlyle and Goethe had endowed it with an intellectual significance in the eyes of nineteenth-century readers which it subsequently lost in Britain, if not in the United States.

⁶ Henry and Mary Garland, *The Oxford companion to German literature*, second edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 87.

Dorfgeschichten or 'Black Forest tales' (4 vols, 1843–53) which were spectacularly popular around the middle of the century. Auerbach's most successful novel, *Barfüßele* (1856), provides a particularly clear literary precedent for certain aspects of Heidi, but a comparison also brings out the originality of Spyri's achievement.⁷ Like Heidi, Amrei is orphaned and sent to live with a witch-like but kindly old woman. She becomes the village goose-girl and, like Heidi, quickly adapts to her new situation, 'finding herself' within the context of her daily routine as she drives her flock of geese to the meadow above the village, and becoming 'one' with nature as she does so. Amrei's experience of being brought up by her reclusive old foster-mother and her awakening to the natural world as she ascends her Black Forest slope are clearly anticipations of Heidi's climbs to even higher altitudes when she goes to live with her grandfather in the Swiss Alps and accompanies Peter and his herd of goats to the pastures high above. But there is a fundamental distinction between the objectives of the two narratives. The ultimate purpose of Amrei's life, as told by Auerbach, is her marriage to a wealthy young farmer, which provides the 'happy end' to her humdrum fairy tale. In Spyri's case there is no such objective, and its very absence emphasizes her view that courtship and marriage are not a girl's sole destiny and should not be her sole aim in life. Taking her bearings from her own experience and from the underlying purpose of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, Spyri proclaims in *Heidi* her unerring faith in the essential importance of achieving a balanced personality. Whether Heidi marries later or not is neither here nor there, and the novel is crafted so deftly that its readers probably did not realize that they had been done out of the conventional happy end to which they were accustomed by the literary paradigms or rôle models offered them by the bulk of popular fiction from Cinderella to Jane Eyre. The second volume of *Heidi* ends with the decision of Klara's grandmother to bequeath a modest annuity to Peter the goatherd and with the doctor's decision to appoint Heidi his sole heir in place of his late daughter; Peter's blind old grandmother is allowed the last word as she asks Heidi to read her a hymn of praise and thanks. What might happen afterwards to these fictitious characters is of no concern to their author: the reality of their childhood experience ends as they receive tangible, financial recognition of their maturity and budding independence from the adults who have helped to look after their progress.

For many British and American readers, however, Heidi's story does not end here. The two principal early translations, those by

⁷ *Barfüßele* appeared in English with the title *The barefooted maiden* (London: Lowe, 1857); the American translation by Eliza Burkminster Lee is called *The little barefoot* (Boston: H.B. Fuller, 1867).

Louise Winsor Brooks (Boston and London, 1884) and Helen B. Dole (Boston, 1889), had established it as a classic of girls' fiction.⁸ In due course they generated a demand for more; this was in line with a general trend confirmed by the success of Louisa Alcott's *Little women* (1869) and its follow-ups, and, later, by the seven sequels to Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908). The same phenomenon may be observed in the case of *Der Trotzkopf* (1885), the most successful German school story for girls; written by Emmy Friedrichs (1829–85), better known as Emmy von Rhoden, and translated for an understandably receptive American readership as *Taming a tomboy* and *An obstinate maid* (both published 1898), it was followed by two sequels written by her daughter, *Trotzkopfs Brautzeit* (1892) and *Aus Trotzkopfs Ehe* (1894), which take her characterful protagonist to adulthood, betrothal and marriage. This demand for more stories about Heidi, which Spyri herself had resisted, increased dramatically in 1937 with the release of the film version of the story starring Shirley Temple as the 'little Alpine miss who wins everyone's heart, including grumpy grandfather's'.⁹ This famous film not only inspired ephemera such as the Shirley Temple edition of *Heidi* 'with illustrations from the photoplay' (Akron/ New York: Saalfeld Publishing Company, 1937). It was also met, and not without success, by the two well-known sequels written by Charles Tritten: *Heidi grows up* (New York, 1938) and *Heidi's children* (New York, 1939).¹⁰ But sequels by other hands are a notoriously hit-and-miss affair, and Tritten's are no exception. Indeed they act as a foil to Spyri's own work by bringing out its absence of sentimentality and its unconventional treatment of a girl's experiences as she is confronted with the unfamiliar and has to come to terms with her rapidly expanding world. Tritten's sequels take Spyri's heroine back down into an artificial world of boarding schools 'to take violin lessons and improve her French' [!] before returning her to her original environment, familiar by now to her countless young readers and all too easily evoked by verbal allusions to 'tall sombre pine trees', the 'twin peaks of the rugged Falknis' and other easily recognizable and easily reproduced motifs. By the time Heidi marries her childhood playmate, Peter, the idyllic landscape created by Spyri has become second-hand.

One of the main reasons for Spyri's continuing popularity may well be that the world she evokes was not identical with the one

⁸ The Brooks translation had already run into six American editions by 1887.

⁹ Quoted from Quentin Falk's 'Critical guide to networked movies, DT television and radio' for 29 May to 4 June, 1993, 12. The story of *Heidi* on television and in the cinema deserves an article to itself, as do its adaptations for the stage and for open-air entertainments such as the Folk Festival in Milwaukee.

¹⁰ Tritten's French versions of Spyri popularized her work in France and French-speaking Switzerland. They appeared as *Heidi jeune fille* and *Heidi et ses enfants* (Paris: Flammarion, 1938–39).

which she could assume was familiar to the majority of her readers. But the risk she takes is well calculated. Her story asks its readers to identify with the mentality of a lonely and neglected peasant child who, at the start, is scarcely five years old and therefore probably younger than they are. By making her child heroine slightly younger than her targeted readership, she invites involvement, while allowing Heidi to articulate her thoughts in language which her readers can understand and yet appreciate as almost 'grown-up'. This she achieves by overlooking the potential social or sociolinguistic divide between them. This aspect is especially interesting when considering its reception in the German-speaking world. Spyri's almost total rejection of any hint of Swiss local dialect makes for sociolinguistic inconsistency in the chapters which take place in Switzerland itself, where the means of spoken communication is dialect, not 'book German'; but this 'unrealistic' touch is offset by her realistic appreciation of the importance to modern people of being able to read, and, in so doing, of overcoming the social handicap of illiteracy; this is a theme which recurs throughout the novel and which is closely associated with Peter the goatherd, a child less adaptable than Heidi, but who in the end comes to realize the advantages of elementary education. Clearly one of Spyri's aims as she described Heidi and then Peter grappling with the alphabet was to encourage children to read: hence the absence of oral and regional linguistic forms in her text. But although there may be no Swiss German dialect in Spyri's text, apart from the grandfather's nickname 'Alp-Öhi' (= the alp grandad) and the names of Peter's goats, its author's ear was sensitive enough to be able to identify her characters by the ways in which they speak. Thus the Sesemann household in Frankfurt is audibly German, not Swiss, and Fräulein Rottenmeier, Klara's stern governess (and one of the most hated characters in all children's literature!), is even more 'German' than the rest, in marked contrast to Klara's kindly grandmother, a lady from a landed background in Schleswig-Holstein who turns out to have more in common with the little Swiss girl than the differences of geographical distance and age between them might at first suggest. From her publishers' point of view the geographical range of Spyri's locations was an added bonus guaranteeing sales throughout the German Empire and, apparently to a lesser degree, in the Austrian Empire, for a book written in German by a woman who was emphatically not a German national.

Spyri's narrative skill is seen in the way her novel is constructed. The upward movement which characterizes the first chapter – Heidi's ascent from Mayenfeld, situated down in the Rhine valley, up to her grandfather's hut high above it, and the conflicting terrors and delights associated with this journey upwards towards what will be the next stage in her experience of life – represents in graphic form the structural element which underlies



Herr Sesemann Finds His Daughter Can Walk Again

(From *Heidi kann brauchen, was es gelernt hat*, 4th impression
(Gotha: F.A. Perthes, 1885))

the novel as a whole. It prefigures Klara's ascent into the Alps with its alternations of intense excited delight and underlying uncertainty and apprehension regarding the visit's outcome and its effect on Klara's health, and also foreshadows the doctor's visit to prepare the way for Klara and – carefully concealed from all but the most precociously responsive readers – to find a cure for his own private trauma caused by the recent death of his daughter. At the end of the story, this element is again present as Herr Sesemann arrives to reclaim his daughter and finds her risen from her wheelchair. In all four cases the ascent up the mountainside is associated with liberation from personal misfortune and with the power of Nature to heal physical, psychological and emotional wounds. Heidi's homelessness, the doctor's grief after his bereavement, Klara's crippling ill-health, and her father's unspoken longing for her dead mother, all share a common feature: loneliness. It was a recurrent theme in many of Spyri's stories from the start of her literary career and is treated with particular intensity in *Daheim und in der Fremde* ('At home and far away', 1872), her movingly told tale of a young mother's loss of her baby son and her husband, and in her more starkly realistic *Der Toni vom Kandergrund* (1882), the story of a poor peasant woman whose talented son is driven to the extreme of loneliness and self-defensive withdrawal when life goes against him. It is present, too, in her last story, *Die Stauffer-Mühle* (Berlin, 1901), a tale of a grandson found and brought home to his family. The use of this theme in *Heidi* is part of Spyri's subtle strategy to ensure that loneliness is overcome and healed on the very spot which Heidi's embittered grandfather had chosen for his attempt to escape from the world and lead the life of a recluse, a rôle which, paradoxically, his kindness of heart and natural generosity contradict as far as the other human beings who need him are concerned. Thus he is able to give affection and security to Heidi, support – quite literally – to Klara as she learns how to walk again, and friendship to the doctor, whose social and professional position have deprived him of close human contacts in Frankfurt. The five 'ascents' which define the narrative line of the novel have an unexpected result: the grandfather slowly comes to meet them halfway; he starts to realize the negative implications of his attempt to live life as a recluse cut off from human society, and demonstrates this realization by his increasing readiness to come down to the village again. Dörfli (the name is simply a diminutive form of the German word for 'village') may thus be taken to represent Spyri's ideal community, one which, like her own childhood home, the village of Hirzel in the Canton of Zurich, is neither too big and impersonal for human relationships, nor too isolated and remote from the rest of human kind, like the grandfather's hut, but midway, as it were, between the restrictions and conventions of the civilized world below and the primitive isolation of the lonely heights above. This theme is one which places



Heidi, Klara and Peter

(From *Heidi kann brauchen, was es gelernt hat*, 4th impression
(Gotha: F.A. Perthes, 1885))

Spyri firmly in the tradition of Swiss literature, for it had played an integral part in its first major modern work, the famous discursive poem *Die Alpen* written in his youth by the great scientist Albrecht von Haller and published in 1729. Haller's poem is both the discovery of a new literary landscape – and thus an important harbinger of Romanticism – and the discovery of a new concept of society, natural, self-sufficient and free, which he contrasts to the corruption of tyranny, privilege and capitalistic greed. Haller's new society is that of the alpine peasant: it is in harmony with Nature and at one with itself, and brings to mind the Golden Age of old. Dörfli is not quite a pastoral idyll. Its inhabitants can be inquisitive and blinkered. Yet Heidi and Klara instinctively respond to its glorious location and recognize its inherent goodness. The deprivations endured by Peter's grandmother in her tumbledown chalet, with scarcely any food or bedding to keep her alive and warm, are a reminder to modern adult readers that *Heidi* is the product of the same period as the Naturalist novels of Zola.¹¹ But in the eyes of its young protagonist, such defects can be overcome. Spyri's fictitious children and the girls for whom they were intended will grow into the new women of a new and better society and century, like Ibsen's Rebecca West, Hauptmann's Anna Mahr and H.G. Wells's Ann Veronica. The Utopian, futuristic note is never sounded stridently, but it is there by implication when the past, personified by the two grandmothers and the grandfather, meets the future embodied in the two girls, and brings about a happy solution to the problems which affect the middle generation.

The motif of ascent, and the themes of loneliness, healing and reconciliation permeate *Heidi*, and contribute essential elements to its unique and characteristic moral landscape. But Spyri resists any Germanic temptation to abstraction by ensuring that the moral statements are made in tangible, realistic terms which she sometimes allows to take on an almost symbolical dimension in the manner associated with the 'Poetic Realism' of her major contemporaries in German literature, such as Gottfried Keller, Adalbert Stifter and Theodor Storm. The most striking instance of Spyri's use of symbolism occurs in the Frankfurt section of volume I (chapters 6 to 13). In chapter 7, when Heidi wakes up to find herself in the home of the Sesemanns in Frankfurt, the bright, open-air tonality of the opening chapters gives way to a darker mood and a deployment by Spyri of ominously negative urban images of an almost Dickensian kind. Heidi feels trapped in a cage of walls and windows too high to see out of, and which generate a sense of

¹¹ Henri R. Paucker makes the point that the secret of Spyri's poetry lies in the social realism underlying her escapist fantasy. See his sensitive article 'Das nicht ganz verlorene Paradies: Die lange Kindheit der Johanna Spyri' in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 11–12 June 1977, 69.

constriction and claustrophobia which reaches a climax in the nervous breakdown which in chapter 12 leads to her return to Switzerland. In chapter 7, however, Heidi makes a brief but significant foray out of the respectable middle-class confines of the Sesemann household and sets off by herself into the big city in order to find the church tower from which the butler Sebastian had told her there is a fine view.

Hand in hand with the tower-keeper, Heidi climbed many, many steps, which became narrower and narrower as they went up, until finally, after one last tiny flight, they found themselves at the top. The tower-keeper lifted Heidi up to the open window.

'Now look down,' he said.

Heidi gazed down upon a sea of roofs, towers and chimneys; soon she drew her head back and said, disappointed: 'It's nothing like what I expected.'

'There, you see, what can a small child like you know about views?'

The tower-keeper's words add a bitter irony to the little mountain-girl's disappointment. The 'ascent' theme is employed here by Spyri to reinforce her young heroine's mounting sense of despair, but significantly the fact that what the girl climbs is a church tower leads to no platitudes about the solace of religion, because for Heidi a church has no such connotations. Her religion is natural. Christianity is present in the story, it is true, but its principal representatives are Klara's kind grandmother, with her picture-books and her sincere conception of Christianity as a code of conduct, and Peter's blind grandmother with her stoical Protestant piety. Is Spyri suggesting that conventional Christianity is a religion of the blind and those who prefer images to reality? Certainly her young protagonist's outdoor 'religion' is closer to that expressed in the famous hymn 'All things bright and beautiful' by Spyri's close contemporary Mrs Alexander (1818–95) than to the indoor piety encouraged by much nineteenth-century children's literature. Heidi's loving disposition towards her grandfather is as integral to it as her spontaneous response to the vast mountain panorama when she is first allowed to go up to the high alpine meadows with Peter and his goats and there experiences bliss for the first time in her deprived young life: 'Heidi was happier than she had ever been in her life. She drank in the golden sunlight, the fresh air, the sweet scent of the flowers, and desired nothing but to stay where she was for ever'. Her increasingly desperate efforts to find that lost happiness again and to share it with those she has come to love, provide the other main structural element in the novel. A pivotal episode is reached when she returns to Dörfli from Frankfurt at the end of volume I, and these two main structural elements meet. The four stages of her return – the railway journey back to Mayenfeld, the ride on the baker's cart to the village, the walk up to the grandmother's dilapidated cottage, and, finally, the steep ascent to



Heidi is Reunited with Her Grandfather

(From *Heidi's Lehr- und Wanderjahre*, second edition (Gotha: F.A. Perthes, 1881))

her grandfather's hut – trace her spiritual quest or pilgrimage and bring out its deeper implications. Its final stage, Heidi's ascent towards happiness, security and self-confidence is nothing more nor less than an account of the regaining of a paradise. Not surprisingly, it inspired some of Spyri's most eloquent writing:

The evening sun lit up the green meadow around her, and now far away over there the great snowfield on the Schesaplana had become visible and shone across to her. Every few steps Heidi had to stop, stand still and turn round, because the high mountains were behind her as she climbed upwards. Now a red sparkle fell on the grass at her feet; she turned round and there – it was even more glorious than she had remembered it or had ever seen it in a dream – the peaks of the Falknis flamed up towards heaven, the vast snowfield gleamed, and rose-red clouds floated past; the grass all around her on the alp was golden, from all the rocks the glowing brightness flowed down towards her, and below her the whole valley was bathed in golden mist. Heidi stood in the midst of all this splendour, and tears of joy and happiness ran down her cheeks, and instinctively she folded her hands and looked up into the sky and gave thanks aloud to God for having brought her home again to find everything still so beautiful, even more beautiful than she had ever realized.

Here the religious note, which Spyri chooses to avoid in the tower episode, achieves an almost baroque exaltation.

A strong lyrical impulse is evident in passages such as this – and there are many, such as Klara's first encounter with the alpine meadows, or the moment of solitary thankfulness Heidi experiences after she has told the grandmother of Klara's impending visit. They justify and explain the high regard in which Spyri was held by the poet and writer Conrad Ferdinand Meyer, one of the most distinguished of her contemporaries. In fact he rather envied her her well-deserved success.¹² But Spyri's voice is at its most rapturous just before these passages, when she describes Heidi's exultation on being back in her beloved mountains in chapter 20:

Heidi was on the alp again. She ran here and there and couldn't decide which spot was the most beautiful. Now she listened to the wind rushing downwards, deep and mysterious, from the crags above, growing ever nearer, ever stronger, till it struck the fir trees and rocked and shook them and seemed to exult with delight: and Heidi had to exult, too, and was blown this way and that by the wind as she did so. Then she ran back to the sunny spot in front of the hut and sat down on the ground and peered into the grass to see how many flowers were open or about to open. And so many happy midges and tiny insects were hopping, crawling and dancing joyfully in the sunlight that Heidi rejoiced along with them, and inhaled the spring air that was rising from the newly uncovered earth in long deep draughts, and thought that the alp had never ever been so beautiful as now. For all these thousands of tiny creatures, she thought, must feel as happy as she did, for they all seemed to be joyfully humming and singing at one and the same time: 'on the alp! on the alp! on the alp!'

¹² Jürg Winkler, *Johanna Spyri. Aus dem Leben der "Heidi"-Autorin* (Rüschlikon-Zürich: Albert Müller, 1989), 100. The correspondence between Spyri and Meyer has been published in an edition by Hans and Rosmarie Zeller, *Briefwechsel 1877–1897* (Kilchberg am Zürichsee: Mirio Romano, 1977).

Though appealing, this passage has no particular literary connotations in English translation. In the German original, however, Heidi's delight in the beauty of nature, with its concentration on the microcosm of insects and blades of grass rather than the mighty mountains, is strongly reminiscent of the letter of 10 May in Goethe's epistolary novel, *Werther*, which uses the same technique and motifs to evoke similar sensations. Ultimately, however, the model for both passages can be found in another pioneering work of Swiss literature, the *Idylls* of Salomon Gessner (Zurich, 1756) which in their day had also enjoyed international success and had delighted their readers with their fresh, spontaneous, yet exquisitely crafted impressions of the natural world.¹³ It is perhaps unusual to be able to detect such stylistic allusions to high literature in a work explicitly intended for children – though we should not forget that it was also, as Spyri carefully specified, for all those who love children. One of the principal secrets of her success was surely her realization that children are capable of appreciating a good deal more than most of their seniors think; what is written for them must be linguistically and intellectually simpler, it is true, but there is no need to deprive them of the delights of poetry which can often appeal more directly to the imagination of young readers than grown-ups think. As a girl and young woman Spyri's favourite author had been Goethe, along with Homer, Lessing and Freiligrath,¹⁴ which is not entirely surprising since though she grew up in the country, her home was a relatively cultured one. Her father was an eminent doctor and early experimenter with anaesthetics, and the darker side of life was not concealed from his daughter's experience, but her mother, Meta Heusser-Schweizer, wrote poetry which achieved considerable recognition in mid-century and was even translated into English under the title *Alpine lyrics* (New York, 1874; London, 1875).¹⁵ Spyri was therefore brought up in a household abreast of the times and well aware of the travails and satisfactions of writing. Her achievement in *Heidi* was well prepared and the book contains a stronger autobiographical element than one might at first think; it was also in a sense the tangible result of a wish she had expressed in a poem written in 1851, in which her expression of her emotional and intellectual dilemmas culminates in the resonant lines:

¹³ See especially the idyll entitled 'Als ich Daphnen auf dem Spaziergang erwartete' in Salomon Gessner, *Idyllen*, ed. E. Theodor Voss (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1973), 63–5. See J. Hibberd, *Salomon Gessner* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

¹⁴ Winkler, 92.

¹⁵ The collection is subtitled 'A selection from the poems of Meta Heusser-Schweizer translated by H.L.L.'. These initials actually refer to Jane Borthwick who, with her sister Sara, had been responsible for *Hymns from the land of Luther* (Edinburgh and London, 1854).

O lehr mich deinen Gang Natur,
Den hohen Gang der ewigen Gesetze.¹⁶

(Teach me your course, Nature,
the lofty course of the eternal laws.)

The poem from which they are taken is an intensely questioning one which is reminiscent of the poetry of Anne and Emily Brontë. The background to Catherine Earnshaw's jubilation on the moors of Yorkshire, like its description, is not so far from Heidi's as one might think.

In line with the Swiss stereotype, Spyri can all too easily be described as a woman of conservative outlook. Yet in the very first chapter of *Heidi* she made her own contribution to women's – and girls' – emancipation. The beginning of the story invites her millions of young readers up into her imaginative world. The upward climb to Dörfli and then on to the grandfather's hut, is long and strenuous, and the day hot. In the village Heidi's aunt gets into conversation with a local woman, and while her back is turned, the little girl disappears to join the goatherd, Peter. In due course she catches sight of Heidi climbing up the mountain-side after Peter and his herd of goats:

At first the child climbed after him with great trouble. In her heavy outfit she was gasping with the heat and discomfort, and exerting all her strength. She said nothing, but looked fixedly at Peter, who, with bare feet and light trousers, was leaping effortlessly here and there, then at the goats which, with their slender legs, were climbing even more easily over the vegetation and up the rocks and steep slopes. Then suddenly the child sat down, pulled off her shoes and stockings as quickly as she could, stood up again, threw off her thick red shawl, unfastened her dress, quickly took it off, and had another to undo: for Dete had put on her Sunday best over her everyday clothes to make things easy, so that nobody would have to carry it. Quick as lightning the everyday dress was off as well, and the little girl was standing in her light short-sleeved petticoat and stretching her bare arms happily in the air.

The episode narrated here may not seem unusual to the late twentieth-century reader. But it marks a decisive moment in the evolution of modern attitudes. The spontaneous action of Spyri's small heroine signifies a farewell to the cumbersome clothing which had limited the female sex's freedom of movement or, to put it another way, it vividly records the joyful discovery of physical freedom on the part of a little girl determined to keep up with the young goatherd, and who is quite ready to discard the restrictive trappings of middle-class propriety in order to do so. Heidi's action may be seen as an early indication of the story's consistent critique of constraints and restrictions; but its implications go further, since they embrace the notion of the fundamental equality of boys and

¹⁶ Winkler, 95.

girls, which is presented as a natural state thwarted only by conditioning and convention. Moreover when Spyri allows the sun and wind to come into contact with Heidi's skin, implying that this is something good and healthy, and does so in a story soon to be read by countless impressionable young readers, she is signalling the imminent demise of the genteel image of delicate, pale little girls and pointing forward to the modern cult of suntan and the open air. Indeed the centrality of this message is reinforced by Klara's recovery up in the Alps. The first volume of *Heidi* was published in 1880; it heralded a shift of attitudes the repercussions of which were to be enormous. The next decade saw the rise of the German *Reformkleidung* movement, with its rejection of bustles and corsetry, and of the *Wandervogel* movement, which encouraged country rambles and mountain hiking and denounced the corrupting influences of city life. What clearly emerges from a survey of these social and cultural trends and their counterparts in other countries is that Spyri was actually well ahead of her times. Indeed Heidi may well have been a childhood favourite of many of the social reformers, for it is well known that what is read in childhood can affect an individual's attitudes for life.

The interest of *Heidi* in the context of its period can also be illustrated by relating the 'therapeutic' message conveyed by its 'healing' theme and personified by Klara to developments taking place at the time in Switzerland. When Spyri was embarking on her career as a children's writer, her country already enjoyed a reputation for its health resorts. During the first half of the nineteenth century these had been situated predominantly on the shores of lakes and in other sheltered situations; but by the end of the century *Switzerland*, Karl Baedeker's handbook for travellers, observes that 'numerous admirable resorts, rendered accessible even for the weak and delicate by means of mountain railways and diligences, are to be found on the mountains and in elevated valleys'. Spring and autumn had been the favourite seasons for this type of tourism, which centred on spas offering hydropathic treatment, whey cures and grape cures. Spyri chose to locate her story in an area she knew well. Though the name Mayenfeld sounds made-up, it is in fact a picturesque old town a mile or two from Bad Ragaz, the well-known spa and health resort in the Rhine Valley not far from Liechtenstein. Here, and especially on the slopes above Maienfeld (as it is now spelt), in the villages of Jenins and Oberrofels (the prototype of Dörfli) and on the Ochsenberg (with its 'Alp-Öhi hut') even higher up, she found the ideal setting for a tale which can easily be imagined taking place in many other locations in Switzerland.¹⁷ The ascent from Bad Ragaz to the alpine

¹⁷ See Georg Thürer, *Johanna Spyri und ihr 'Heidi'*, Schweizer Heimatbücher, 186 (Bern: Haupt, 1982).

meadows, which forms such a prominent element in both parts of the story, mirrors the trend actually taking place at the time to seek out higher locations for health reasons, and which resulted in the opening up of high altitude resorts, such as Davos, which relied on the health-giving quality of their air.¹⁸ By the end of the century Davos had become a fashionable 'Luftkurort' (or air cure resort) catering especially for people with pulmonary ailments; nicknamed the 'Weltsanatorium', it was frequented by writers and artists such as John Addington Symonds and 'discovered' by Thomas Mann, whose 1924 novel *Der Zauberberg* ('The magic mountain') is set in a Davos sanatorium. Seen from this angle, *Heidi* and her 'magic mountain' may be seen as a precursor or, rather, as an important though easily overlooked link between different cultural eras.

The theme of healing which plays such a central part in *Heidi* recurs in her later novel *Schloß Wildenstein* (1892). Here Spyri presents a rather larger group of children in a 'Maienfeld' setting and a plot which revolves around the healing of an elderly recluse and his young grandchild, Leonore. The social parameters are different, however; it is the aristocratic owner of the castle who needs to be cured of his physical and psychological ailments, and who is finally healed thanks to the intervention of a local family akin to Spyri's own. No-one would claim that the result is equal to *Heidi*, or to Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The secret garden* (1911), a story with a somewhat similar theme. The reasons are not far to seek. In *Heidi* all Spyri's narrative and descriptive gifts are engaged in telling a story that is uniquely hers, and the resultant balance of style and content is almost perfect. Its structure has been discussed already, but there is one other element which contributes decisively to the satisfying effect it makes and to its classical status, and this is its masterly use of the *Leitmotif*. Had this anything to do with the music of Richard Wagner? The home of Johanna Spyri and her husband Johann Bernhard Spyri was something of a centre in Zurich cultural life, and both the great Swiss writer Gottfried Keller and the composer Richard Wagner were among their acquaintances. She may therefore have been inspired by the example of a great contemporary: at all events, attentive reading soon reveals that the text of *Heidi* is permeated by recurrent images, the most powerful and evocative being the three old fir trees that grow behind the grandfather's hut. At first, with their long, thick, untrimmed branches, they seem to be equated with the grandfather himself; but during the Frankfurt chapters they come to represent the world that Heidi has temporarily lost. One day (in chapter 7) the redoubtable Fräulein Rottenmeier finds her staring out into the street from the Sesemann home:

¹⁸ See *Bäder und Kurorte der Schweiz* (Aarau: Sauerländer, 1910), a specialist guide to the spas and resorts of Switzerland issued by the Schweizerische Balneologische Gesellschaft, which dates the discovery of Davos to 1862 and its popularity to the later 1870s.

‘What is the matter? What do you think you are doing? [. . .]’ Fräulein Rottenmeier shouted at the girl.

‘I heard the fir trees rustling, but I don’t know where they are and I cannot find them again,’ Heidi answered, looking sadly in the direction where the sound of passing carriages had just died away, and which had sounded to her ears so like the rushing of the föhn in the firs that she had run out towards it in delight.

‘Fir trees? Are we in a forest? Whatever next!’

Fräulein Rottenmeier’s irate incomprehension brings home the full and true meaning of the fir trees in a way any child can understand.

Johanna Spyri’s masterpiece has retained its position as a children’s classic. In the light of its literary and cultural richness it is easy to see why its hold on the imagination has been wider than that. In his *Der Winterkrieg in Tibet* (1981), the Swiss dramatist Friedrich Dürrenmatt tells us that as a small boy he was made to read *Heidi* (and *Robinson Crusoe*), neither of which he enjoyed. Later on, he relates a fantasy sequence set in a devastated world after a third world war; having survived this nuclear catastrophe, he encounters another survivor, a university printer wheeling a cartload of books including one by Lessing. But ironically they are bound for the incinerator because what is now in demand is *Heidi* by Johanna Spyri: ‘make a note of the name,’ he tells the narrator, ‘it’s a real classic’. Some pages later he comes across another survivor. This time it is a small girl who pertly tells him that she has ‘drawn the whole of *Heidi*’. In the context of Dürrenmatt’s labyrinthine later works it is not always easy to tell whether these episodes are a wry indictment of a book he dismissed as childish and trivial, or whether they are, perhaps, a belated realization that, for all its moral sanity, Lessing’s work is no longer able to communicate its message to most of us, and is therefore irrelevant and out-of-date, whereas Spyri’s work is still alive, even if sometimes only in the debased form of an illustrated abridged version for children. Perhaps, in today’s world, Lessing’s Nathan seems far too wise, whereas Heidi can still set a good example by appealing to the child in all of us. ‘Bloß Jugendschriftstellerin? (Is she just a writer for children?)’ asked her obituarist in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* on 9 July 1901: the question is still a pertinent one today.

KINGS, HEROES AND WARRIORS: ASPECTS OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN IRELAND IN THE ERA OF EMERGENT NATIONALISM

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Commenting on the paucity of children's literature and the shortage of critical literature in modern Ireland on the topic of children's books, Dr Patricia Donlon wrote in 1985:

Ireland has a great tradition of folklore and fairytale, but one cannot grow up on a diet of just one foodstuff – adventure, magic, poetry, fantasy, nonsense, all are necessary to nourish the imagination. Literature is all about making sense of life – and where more than Ireland in the mid-eighties do our young people need such an aid?¹

Where indeed, if not in a country struggling to discover its own national identity? During the period 1880 to 1920, political events determined that Ireland moved rapidly from being a province of the United Kingdom to independent status and self-government. During these crucial years which saw the fall of Parnell, the decline of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy class, the bitter controversies concerning the revival of the Irish language and the trauma of the Easter rebellion of 1916, two main literary movements gathered momentum, and sought, through a study of the past, to find a national and cultural identity. These movements were the Anglo-Irish literary revival and the Gaelic League. Broadly speaking, one of the main differences between the two movements was their chosen language of self-expression, either the English vernacular used in the daily life of the people, or the dying Irish language in which was vested the traditional culture of the island.² The unifying

* I should like to thank Drs David Blamires, Ian Roberts and Jonathan West for their invaluable help and support during the writing of this article. The following people also provided information and encouragement: Dennis Butts, Patricia Donlon, Cherie Gladstone, Clive Hurst and the staff concerned with the Opie collection, Gearóid Mac Eoin, Brian Murdoch, Ruth Potterton, Kimberley Reynolds, Mireia Sagarra, Janet Wallwork and Christine Wilkie. The absence of bibliographical and critical material specifically related to literature for children in Ireland has made investigation of this topic difficult and all suggestions have been gratefully received.

¹ Patricia Donlon, 'Irish children's fiction', *Linen Hall Review* (Autumn 1985), 12–13.

² For the background, see F.S.L. Lyons, *Ireland since the famine* (London: Fontana, 1973).