

Business Rhetoric in German Novels: From *Buddenbrooks* to the Global Corporation

Ernest Schonfield

Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2018 (306 pages)

Someone seeking to study business rhetoric might not instinctively turn to German novels as a likely source of wisdom. Literature, however, grapples with the great questions of human existence, from love and faith to suffering and death, so perhaps it is not surprising that a country with one of the most successful modern economies should also have produced a literary tradition of sustained reflection upon business. In a lively and interesting study, Ernest Schonfield draws upon the principles of classical rhetoric to examine nine novels, covering roughly a century of German history (from 1901 to 2013), to explore their treatment of rhetoric in the context of business and marketing. This is not a study of economic theory or the workings of markets, but rather of what we might most commonly call business communication; as Schonfield himself says in his introduction, “The focus here is not on economic theory or history in literature but on the literary representation of rhetoric and persuasion as essential aspects of any business activity” (2).

The nine novels treated in the book include some by well-known authors likely to be recognized by a wide audience: for example, Thomas Mann (*Buddenbrooks* / *The Buddenbrooks*), Heinrich Mann (*Der Untertan* / *The Loyal Subject*), and Bertolt Brecht (*Dreigroschenroman* / *The Threepenny Opera*). The others are less likely to be known to English readers: Gabriele Tergit (*Käsebier erobert den Kurfürstendamm* / *Käsebier Takes Berlin*), Ingeborg Bachmann (*Malina* / *Malina*), Hermann Kant (*Das Impressum* / *The Imprint*), Friedrich Christian Delius (*Unsere Siemens-Welt* / *Our Siemens World*), Kathrin Röggla (*wir schlafen nicht* / *we never sleep*), and Philipp Schönthaler (*Das Schiff das singend zieht auf seiner Bahn* / *The Ship That Goes Singing on Its Way*). Although the book will naturally be of interest to students of German literature, it presupposes no reading knowledge of German, and six of the nine novels under discussion are available in English translation (by my reckoning, all but the Kant, Delius, and Schönthaler). Indeed, one could readily imagine using Schonfield’s book to supply the syllabus for an undergraduate course reading many of the novels he examines. The various chapters stand successfully on their own and can be read individually by someone interested only in a particular novel, but certain themes nevertheless tie together the volume as a whole, a few of which I single out here for special comment.

Schonfield is especially interested in depictions of business rhetoric as persuasive and performative (his words). The idea of business rhetoric as persuasive is no doubt clear enough; actors within the business world are typically attempting to persuade others of the value of a product or service, the good intentions of a business, the social benefits of various economic activities, and so on. Such rhetoric is also performative because it does not consist simply of words on a page, but is rather embedded within a broader oratorical context of presentation, gesture, vocal delivery, image management, the establishment of character (or, borrowing the classical rhetorical term, *ethos*), and all

the associated techniques, almost theatrical in character, that accompany and reinforce rhetoric's persuasive intentions. Thus the businessmen in *Buddenbrooks* devote a great deal of attention to projecting a certain image and "keeping up appearances" (22–25); or, a century later, the corporate professionals in *Das Schiff das singend zieht auf seiner Bahn* work hard to maintain a public image of themselves as "corporate athletes," effective, fit, competitive, well-trained, ambitiously devoted to winning (181–84). The performative element of rhetoric is essential in order to achieve its persuasive goals, whether the audience is potential customers and the public (think especially of advertising), other businesses, or politicians.

Another important theme of the book is the close parallel between business and politics. Almost all of the novels considered here deal, directly or indirectly, with both the economic and political realms. For Schonfield this is hardly surprising because success in both realms requires effective use of the same rhetorical techniques. Indeed, since the goal of rhetoric is persuasion—a point made already by Aristotle—we should expect to find many parallels between politics and business. One of the most striking examples of this discussed by Schonfield is Heinrich Mann's *Der Untertan*, in which the main character deliberately adopts the rhetoric (often the precise language) of Kaiser Wilhelm II (the "most prominent media personality of the age," 40), turning it to success in managing a paper factory. He cultivates his personal charisma (the performative aspect) and manipulates public opinion by means of what we today would call "spin" or "opposition research" to such a degree that the line between his business and his political activity becomes blurred. The novel, Schonfield concludes, provides "a master class in successful media management" (53). A different example of the blurred boundary between business and politics can be found in *Unsere Siemens-Welt*, in which the corporation Siemens is shown to rely heavily on political connections and support in order to maintain a favorable public image (150–52), particularly with regard to its use of Nazi slave labor from the camps during the Second World War (140–44).

Finally, Schonfield is interested in how language not only describes but also helps constitute the worlds of business and politics. We understand the world in terms of linguistic metaphors, be they Smith's "invisible hand" or Marx's "alienated labor." These metaphors supply the terms of reference by which we understand and evaluate political and economic activity. Rhetoric thus not only seeks to persuade, it also establishes the norms by which persuasive speech is judged. One of Schonfield's most interesting explorations of this comes in his discussion of Hermann Kant's *Das Impressum*, a novel describing economic and political bureaucracy within the East German context and thus subject to that regime's taboos about what topics could and could not be discussed publicly. Because the communist state established official norms of acceptable rhetoric, a novelist like Kant could probe and question the existing system only in ways that did not too flagrantly challenge those established norms—a nice example of rhetoric seeking to reconstitute the politico-business bureaucracy, albeit in cautious ways. As Schonfield says, Kant's "criticisms are smuggled in, carefully covered by a mass of socialist commonplaces" (132). Schonfield similarly argues that Brecht's *Dreigroschenroman* reveals

the constitutive force of rhetoric; it is “a novel that exhibits certain types of discourse to show how language is used to exert political and economic influence” (78–79). It thus “reveal[s] how so-called facts are framed and selected in order to pursue specific interests” (2), as Schonfield early describes one of the goals behind his literary analysis of business rhetoric.

Readers interested in the “interdisciplinary dialogue between literature and economics” will find much of interest in this volume (1). As one such reader, I approached the book with sympathetic interest but also, I must admit, with a certain skepticism about whether “business rhetoric in German novels” would prove a substantial enough subject to hold my interest through an entire monograph. Yet I came away not only convinced but also wanting to go read a few of the novels that had been previously unknown to me—an experience likely to be shared by other readers of this interesting book.

—Peter C. Meilaender (e-mail: peter.meilaender@houghton.edu)
Houghton College, New York