Chapter 1

A life, a novel

1 WHO WAS BRENTANO?

The figure of Franz Brentano appears in an oddly shifting light when one reads university chronicles and newspaper articles of his time, family accounts, and the memoirs of his pupils. For his detractors he was an ecclesiastic and a relic from the Middle Ages; for the Catholic Church a rebellious heterodox in odour of Ultramontanism. His most implacable enemies, Husserl tells us, even went so far as to call him, variously, a Jesuit in disguise, a pratter, a Pharisee, a sophist, and a scholastic.1

On the other hand, we find enthusiastic descriptions of Brentano as an accomplished lecturer, the inventor of riddles, and the idol of fin-de-siècle Viennese society. His students adored him and rallied around him whenever he was attacked by the most reactionary fringe of academe. There is still today a ‘Brentano’s move’ in chess, a Verteidigung der spanische Partie (the Spanish defence).2

Constantly the target of furious attacks by his colleagues counter-balanced by the boundless admiration of his students, Brentano never yielded to the clerics; nor did he stoop to compromise by joining that lay milieu which could have offered him sanctuary.

Predominant in the memoirs of his students is the image of a master endowed with considerable charisma and great moral authority. Höfler, for example, writes:

Brentano was surrounded by a sort of romantic aura, the charm of a scion of the Brentano dynasty of poets and thinkers. His flowing black locks, his thick black beard, and his pallid face were enigmatic in their effect, with the silvery flecks of grey among the black [...] the strange quality of Brentano’s face, which could only be that of a philosopher, a poet or an artist sprang from his coal-black eyes which, always lightly veiled, bore an entirely distinctive expression of weariness.3

1. Husserl 1976, 47.
2. Brentano 1900 (-1903).
3. Höfler 1917a, 67.
Expressions of devotion are to be found in the memoirs of Husserl and Stumpf; and the admiration with which Freud described him to Silberstein is well known (“a marvellous intellect”). Yet some dissonant notes were struck even within the innermost circle of his pupils. Ehrenfels writes, perhaps in the aftermath of an altercation between Brentano and Meinong:

The abundance of Brentano’s spiritual talent, the ease with which he deployed the arts of the intellectual game, his lively and wide-ranging wit often prompted him to draw an almost playful, sometimes feuilletonistic, veil over his scientific thought, so profoundly sound, clear and impetuous. This former Catholic priest who, after a purgatory of struggle and soul-searching courageously sacrificed his job, honour, social position, and the material wherewithal of his existence to the integrity of his convictions, saw himself gratifyingly adulated by the liberal intelligentsia of Phaecian society. As would shortly transpire, he was already planning to marry into the only social sphere accessible to him as a secessionist server of the Church: the Jewish intelligentsia. Thus he was unable to find a pitch which chimed with his true nature. With a semi-embarrassed smile he would venture to us his proofs of the existence of God. Sometimes I detected the unctuous tones of the preacher; on other occasions it seemed that I was sitting with a vaguely frivolous journalist. His behaviour in both public and private attracted attention because it fluctuated between two irreconcilable extremes.

No biographer, however, can gainsay Brentano’s charm, a mix of physical handsomeness and intellectual vigour. Stumpf describes him thus:

All this [Brentano’s competence] was enhanced by the personal impression of the teacher, who was inspired by the consciousness of a high mission, who became wholly absorbed in the great task of a reconstruction of philosophy, whose thinking and feeling merged in this one focus and once again emanated from it. Add to this the outward appearance of the tall ascetic figure in priestly garb with the very finely modelled, magnificent head of a thinker; the high, beautiful forehead; and the keen eyes hidden under a high brow and somehow drooping lids, which noticed every expression of doubt or questioning on the face of a student. His soft but very clear and well formulated speech compelled the listener to breathless silences and rapt attention during the abstract investigation; it was the force of the firmly structured logic of his thought rather than any special art that fascinated his students, although he did occasionally employ an appropriate anecdote. What a contrast to old Hoffman! The lecture hall was filled to the last chair and stayed that way; admittedly not everyone was registered officially.

4. See Boelich 1989, 82, and below.