Berthold Auerbach (1812-1882) was one of Germany's most widely read Realist novelists. In the preface to *Village Tales from the Black Forest* (1844), Auerbach describes his realistic, non-idealized literary style, which, in this case, is used to provide a detailed account of peasant life in southwest Germany. Though subscribing to realism in method, Auerbach nevertheless portrayed rural village life as a simpler, more authentic, non-decadent counterpart to urban bourgeois existence.

Forewords Prevent Slander [*Vorreden spart Nachreden*]

So goes a good German proverb, and thus I would like to preface my *Village Tales* [*Dorfgeschichten*] with a few introductory words. These representations were composed far from the places where they take place; it is up to the reader to decide if the viewpoint and tone are correct. It was my aim to present these life portraits neither directly from the life of the peasantry nor, on the other hand, from an urban standpoint. I believed that city dwellers and country folk alike could thus turn to them with interest. The peculiarities of dialect and manner of speech are therefore only retained to the extent that they give an essential impression. I have always thought of myself as narrating orally; the events are there as historical facts. Thus it must sometimes occur that some life rule or general remark is inserted.

I have deliberately not reached back into the historical past, although such a setting offers a writer's fantasy great freedom and one can attach one's stories to great events. Instead, I sought to give form to all aspects of peasant life today. In the first place, I did not intend to try to put an end to errors and abuses and that sort of thing. If this happens to result from these stories, then that would be joyful satisfaction for me. The fact that I touch upon grievances relating to Catholic clergy has only to do with the geographic setting of these tales. I expressly protest any notion that such things only occur among the Catholic clergy; in Protestant regions they take different forms. Religious life, which here is first and foremost church life, is a fundamental element in German folk life. It is the historical consciousness of the infinite, standing fast in its entirety, fulfilling its character. If individual consciousness already establishes itself here, if some individuals raise themselves above the given forms, then they give the characters in general their essential imprint. It is thus frivolous to ignore the religious foundation of peasant life, and it would be poetically untrue.
In centralized nations, where there is historical unity and uniformity, it is easier for a poet to propose national types. The English and the French have grown up under the same laws and similar living conditions and historical impressions. Their character has something in common, not merely in a general way, but rather in details, in habits, views, etc. We, however, separated by history, are much more an expression of the development of provincial life. Thus, analogous to the recent tendency in historical research on the provincial, the poetry which is taken from folk life must concentrate more and more on the local. Just as we have the duty to give political form to the individual detail, we also have this duty in literature. The consciousness of unification and unity must still sink in, and thus here, too, we have a portrait of a life divided into many components. The rounding off of our regions' borders has admittedly torn apart provincial life in many ways, but its core remains unchanged.

I have, without aversion, named one specific village, my birthplace. It was from reports from my hometown that I based the story "The Pipes of War" [Die Kriegspfeife], previously published in the journal Der Schwarzwälder-Bote. The peasants are now utterly upset with me and say that it is all a lie and that I wanted to make them appear ridiculous. One sees why both high and low circles call for a fictitious setting when contemporary life is represented. I, however, consider it a duty that we do not hesitate to choose a real setting and to call it by its real name, if we want to really approach life. Authors of historical novels seek an authentic foundation and do not shy away from naming the actual locations where their stories take place. This should be the case as well when the setting is contemporary; in this way, a picture of contemporary life becomes historical. By shrouding specific places with images, modern folk literature can thus consciously take up and continue what, in earlier times, legends had done in a naïve way.

I have attempted to portray an entire village from the first house down to the last. The customs and mores are taken from real life. The songs do not come from any printed work, they have not to my knowledge previously been published.

It has been nineteen years since I have left you, you quiet hometown, in order to wander along paths which led far from your peaceful boundaries. The silent pull of childhood love has steered my spirit back to you and with wordless movements I let the tones resound again which had almost faded away. In front of my window the mighty Rhine rushes, Germany's artery, a shining band of light rolls through from beyond like silver, the waves ripple and shimmer in the moonlight. The waves of the Neckar which rolled past by hometown – the great German river peacefully absorbed them and carried them off to the sea. So, too, may these images, which I now send out to my fatherland, so, too, may they take their place in the great stream of German life as a modest wave which issued forth from native mountains.

Mainz. Berthold Auerbach

Original German text reprinted in Max Bucher, Werner Hal, Georg Jäger, and Reinhard Wittmann, eds. Realismus und Gründerzeit: Manifeste und Dokumente zur deutschen Literatur

Translation: Jonathan Skolnik