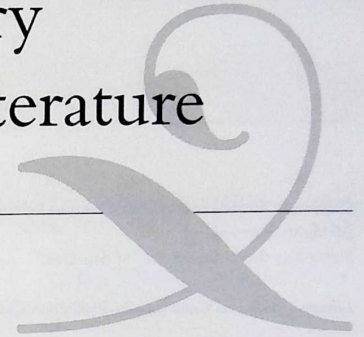


A New History of German Literature



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Introduction

Every poem, according to a dictum of Paul Celan's, is datable ("Jedes Gedicht ist datierbar"). Although it may seem quite uncontroversial, this statement by one of the 20th century's most original poets implies a forceful critique of traditional literary history: a critique that proceeds not from a formalist rejection of history, but from a radicalization of the idea that literature is historical. The date each poem or work of literature bears is internal to the work itself, the temporal center around which it crystallizes. The meaning of literary texts—their capacity to testify to human experience and to resonate in the lives of their readers—is inseparably tied to the singularity of their moment, to their primary historical character as contingent events. Paradoxically, in the inherited form of literary-historical writing, it is just this character of literature that goes missing. Traditional literary histories treat individual texts and performances not as singular occurrences, but as illustrative instances of some force, tendency, or norm such as the spirit of an age or a nation, a class bias, or an aesthetic ideal. To grasp the historical character of a literary text is, according to this way of thinking, to see the individual case as typical of something else, and therefore as replaceable. This operation effaces literature's "datable" singularity and contingency. A major aim of *A New History of German Literature* is to find a mode of presentation that restores access to this dimension of literature.

Another way of stating this aim is to say that *A New History of German Literature* attempts to preserve the quality of "encounter" that characterizes the most exhilarating experiences of reading. Genuine encounters promote fascination and curiosity. They can even change the course of a reader's life by creating the desire for a deeper acquaintance with a writer or work. Walter Benjamin, whose ideas on history were an essential inspiration for this volume, stressed the importance to historical understanding of such momentary interruptions of the continuum of time, which he likened to a "tiger's leap" into the past. It seemed to the editors that such encounters have the best chance of happening when the presentation of works or events is focused on particulars. For example, Goethe, the towering figure of the German literary tradition, is to be met in these pages not in his monumentality, but at three or four telling moments of his career. We see him writing his *Werther*, censoring his own *Ro-*

man *Elegies*, declaring his *Faust* complete; in one entry, we even see him hiding behind a curtain to listen to F. A. Wolf lecture on Homer. This approach conveys the compelling intellectual interest of the material treated here, be it canonical or relatively unknown. Encounters in this sense—confrontations, recognitions, discoveries, even affronts—await the reader throughout these pages: encounters with the tradition of mystical writing from Meister Eckart to Angelus Silesius, with the writers' guild of the cobbler-poet Hans Sachs, with the difficult life of the 17th-century businesswoman and memoirist Glikl bas Yehuda Leib. The drama of the event catches Lessing, Germany's most important Enlightenment man of letters, in the act of misdating his great comedy *Minna von Barnhelm*. It shows us E. T. A. Hoffmann, author of the tale from which Freud would derive his theory of the "uncanny," deliberating on a murder case. In the redecoration of a church altar it reveals how thoroughly Luther's ideas changed the individual churchgoer's experience. Major authors are placed in unexpected contexts: Heinrich von Kleist is seen in connection with the emergence of guerrilla warfare in the resistance to Napoleon; Wilhelm Raabe's novel *Stopfkuchen* is read as a critique of colonialist politics; Kafka's story "The Judgment" is viewed in the context of international politics. Placed next to such major figures, relatively unknown writers ascend from the status of footnotes to that of engaging discoveries: Hans Staden, the 16th-century traveler to colonial Brazil; Salomon Maimon, whose autobiography charts the path from the Polish ghetto to Enlightenment Berlin; Irmgard Keun, the advocate of the "New Woman" during the Weimar Republic. A public controversy, such as the heated dispute surrounding the Hebrew studies of the Humanist Johannes Reuchlin, can bring the tensions within an intellectual movement to light. Differences of intellectual style are elicited through juxtaposition, as when Benjamin and Heidegger are each glimpsed in 1927. The strategy, in short, is to shun summary and cataloguing and to exploit, rather, the communicative potential of the anecdotal and the discontinuous for generating sudden illumination.

A New History of German Literature participates in the "reflective turn" in recent historiography. Its formal arrangement and selection of contents are motivated by a consideration of the conditions that spawned literary history as both an intellectual inquiry and a literary genre. Such self-scrutiny is especially appropriate to a volume that portrays German literary and intellectual traditions, since the historical treatment of literature is itself arguably a German discovery. But it also corresponds to a feature that distinguishes German culture from its European counterparts: a tradition of self-reflection that results in a remarkable—often exhilarating, on occasion ponderous—interpenetration of imagination and conceptualization. The idealizing cliché according to which Germany is a "land of poets and thinkers" (alliteratively fixed in German as "Land der Dichter und Denker") attests to this characteristic habit of thought. One of the unique aspects of *A New History of German Literature* is the effort to do justice to the reflective bent of German culture by including articles on such figures as the philosophers Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and

Wittgenstein. This decision required an expansion of the traditional notion of literature as well as a recasting of literary history as an interdisciplinary endeavor.

The contention that literary history had its beginnings in Germany (shorthand for "German-speaking countries") is confirmed by the striking observation that opens Hippolyte Taine's influential *History of English Literature* (1864): "History, within a hundred years in Germany, and within sixty years in France, has undergone a transformation, owing to a study of literatures." Taine's remark dates the emergence of literary history as a field of inquiry within the last third of the 18th century, when a large-scale semantic transformation fundamentally altered inherited conceptions of tradition and change, fame and aesthetic value. As Reinhart Koselleck has shown, during this period the term "history," which had always allowed for a plural usage (for example, the "histories" of dynasties, institutions, voyages), acquired its modern meaning as a collective singular term referring to the overriding process that gives direction and sense to all individual patterns of change. The predominant experience was no longer one of permanence and of continuity with the past, but of accelerating alteration in all dimensions of communal life. This acute sense of historical difference, this deepening of the gulf between present and past, affected the apprehension of art and literature as well, rendering implausible any sense of enduring and universal aesthetic achievement. In this context, a new task arose: to understand cultural artifacts not as reflecting eternal values, but as the expressions of their age.

It is tempting to conjecture that Taine's dating of the transformation of historical thought was meant to be exact. In 1764, Johann Joachim Winckelmann's *History of the Art of Antiquity* had appeared, the book generally held today to be the foundational text of art history. Winckelmann's contemporaries quickly sought to extend his work to other realms. Already in the late 1760s, Johann Gottfried Herder began to sketch out a historical conception of culture that would embrace the entire range of human expression. His essay on Shakespeare (1773) demolished the notion of timeless artistic standards and derived the essential features of Shakespearean dramatic form from the conditions of his age. Herder insisted on understanding literary artifacts as interwoven with religious and political institutions and beliefs, with commerce, custom, and morality. This is not to say, of course, that literary history had not been practiced prior to Herder. The Enlightenment had conceived of it as a documentation of the progress of taste; the 17th century had created monuments of erudition that catalogued writers and works of the past; treatises on poetics such as those by Martin Opitz (1624) and Johann Christoph Gottsched (1730) had often included a survey of prior achievements. But such histories are hardly recognizable as anything that today might count as historical depiction. This is why Taine's remark is so suggestive. His still vivid sense that a transformation of the very notion of history had occurred a century before him captures the innovative force of Winckelmann's and Herder's contributions.

The intellectual revolution that would culminate in Hegel's thought that

time and history are the very mode of existence and self-realization of what he called “Spirit” (*Geist*) required new discursive forms capable of capturing both the unity and diversity—the logic in movement—of cultural expression. The achievement of such forms is one of the major accomplishments of German Romanticism, to which we owe both the central concepts of modern literary criticism and the overview of European literary history still accepted today. In particular, August Wilhelm Schlegel, who delivered a series of influential lectures on the history of literature and art in Berlin in 1803–1804, and his brother Friedrich, who delivered similar lectures in Paris and Cologne (1803–1804) and later in Vienna (1812), share the credit for creating a capacious, philosophically grounded vision of European literary history. The operative word here is “European.” Like Herder before them, the Schlegels were not primarily concerned with a nationally based history of German literature, although they highlighted such works as the *Nibelungenlied*, which in subsequent decades would take on the aura of a national epic. Their inquiries were cosmopolitan, concerned with the “Spirit,” which appeared in various national guises and expressed itself in different idioms. There is a double lesson to be learned here: first, that the conception of literary history developed by the Schlegels does not stand alone, but is keyed to a general theory of poetics and, beyond this, to a philosophy of mind; second, that although they created the intellectual preconditions for a national history of literature, the Schlegels’ own framework of inquiry was vigorously comparatist, their object of study what Goethe—and later Marx—would describe as *Weltliteratur* (world literature). An important intention of *A New History of German Literature* is to recover the double reference to theoretical inquiry and to the context of world literature that is built into the Romantic concept of literary history.

Neither Herder nor the Schlegels were professional literary scholars, nor did they address their works to an audience of students and fellow historians. The academic transformation of literary history is, rather, the accomplishment of the 19th century. By 1860, professorships in Germanic philology had been founded at every German-speaking university. Professional organizations were established, critical editions—even of recent writers—were produced, journals devoted to literary-historical research proliferated. Thus emerged the professionalized discipline of literary history. Nonetheless, some literary histories looked beyond the university context. For example, Gottfried Gervinus’s five-volume *History of the Poetic National-Literature of the Germans* (1835–1842)—often considered the pioneering effort of the genre—was driven by a liberal political agenda, while the poet Joseph von Eichendorff’s *History of the Poetic Literature of Germany* (2 vols., 1857) promoted a deeply nostalgic form of cultural conservatism. Increasingly, however, literary histories were keyed to the dual demands of university-based research and university-based education (primarily the preparation of high school teachers). As research generated further research, the ideal of historical synthesis became more and more unattainable. Every text recovered from obscurity, every case of literary influence demonstrated, every detail of a writer’s life discovered, increased the complexity of

the knowledge base that historical narrative was supposed to organize and make sense of. Thus, by the end of the century, the genre had abandoned its philosophical and political ambitions, restricting itself to providing a synopsis of current scholarly consensus. Literary histories became the narrative meta-texts of the disciplinary and educational apparatus that produced them, serving important functions such as outlining a framework for university and high-school curricula, supplying mnemonic devices useful in exam preparation, and establishing links to neighboring historical disciplines. Perhaps even more crucially, they consolidated a diffuse sense of “national” literary tradition and thus supplied an important tool for the transmission of cultural literacy. In this sense, the primary function of academic literary history was the production of cultural identity within the context of the nation-state.

With few exceptions, the genre of literary history looks very much today as it did at the end of the 19th century. Its basic form—an overriding narrative divided according to periods or movements; the treatment of individual texts as exemplifying large-scale historical tendencies—has remained intact regardless of changes in methodology and ideology. Indeed, one of the remarkable features of literary history as practiced from the late 19th century up to the present is that it has so blithely resisted the revolutionary transformations of narrative form initiated in modernism. At the same time, it has proved relatively immune to the philosophical critique of historicism, from Nietzsche to Heidegger and Benjamin. The reason this is so is that the genre’s institutional context—university-based research and instruction within a state system of education—has itself remained quite stable, despite the social and political changes of the 20th century. *A New History of German Literature* seeks to accomplish quite different aims, however, making it both possible and necessary to transform the structure and content of literary-historical presentation. This transformation has left none of the major terms of our title untouched: neither “history,” nor “German,” nor “literature” means quite the same thing here as in the standard works.

We began with a different readership. Our forerunners since the late 19th century have typically addressed students and scholars of German literature. *A New History of German Literature* is certainly not intended to exclude this group—on the contrary!—but from the start we have also had the general or educated reader in mind. This reader we imagine as someone who may be motivated by desires other than successfully completing an examination or preparing a lecture. Perhaps it is a person who, having read a work by Schiller or Kafka, having seen an opera by Mozart or Wagner, has always wanted to learn more about the traditions from which those works emerged. Very likely it will be someone who has noticed that so many ideas crucial to the reinvigoration of humanistic inquiry during the past thirty years have their source in German-language works. Where is this reader’s home? Under the conditions of international mobility, of modern book production and electronic communication, of ethnic diversity within the great cities of the world, the only possible answer to this question is: “Almost anywhere.” Our vision is of readers

with varying interests, who are curious, for whatever reason, about German literature and culture. We believe that the history of German literature is a vital resource wherever intelligence and imagination are devoted to exploring the complexities of the world made by human thought.

Three elements, then, are presupposed here. The first is what might be termed the archival simultaneity of German literature: works that originated in different historical contexts are *co-present*—today, in the age of the Internet, more than ever—in the various media of reproduction, storage, and distribution, ordered by library catalogues and search engines. The second element is the book's readers, a group held together by no national tradition, no disciplinary training, no particular profession. The third term in our equation is a range of curiosities rooted in serendipitous encounters, individual biographies, historical circumstances, particular passions and interests, chosen or inherited obligations. *A New History of German Literature* is intended to be useful within the configuration defined by these three elements. One might say—borrowing a term from computer science—that it is a random access history, providing multiple points of entry and allowing for various reading agendas. This volume has no single story to tell, but sets many stories in relation to one another. Its aim is to allow various types of curiosity to unfold, divergent patterns to emerge, different—and often dissonant—resonances to be heard.

To accomplish this end, we chose to rely on the fundamental organizational grid of every history: chronology. Thus, each entry is marked by a date, usually a year, sometimes a month or even a day. Each date marks an event, a particular happening, and our book as a whole presents the sequence of these events. In many cases, the dated event in question is the composition or publication of a text, but other sorts of events can serve as the focus of an entry as well: a visit by a noble personage, an invention, a court decision, a theatrical production. In every case the event was selected because it highlights a network of interconnections and brings into representation a complex historical field. With this strategy—gratefully adapted from *A New History of French Literature* (1989)—we have tried to approach the level of historicity that was so important to Celan: the singularity of the literary event.

Although “datable,” the literary event is not fixed within a single temporal order or pattern of historical meaning. As Erwin Panofsky pointed out in an essay from 1927, every historical phenomenon “represents the intersection of numerous frames of reference that confront each other as products of different spaces and times and whose interaction in each instance leads to a unique result.” Such interactions produce what Walter Benjamin called “constellations,” configurations of historical facts that converge in a moment of sudden insight. Thus multiple paths radiate from each event to other events. Echoes, influences, and contrasts become perceptible. Sometimes these interconnections are chronologically proximate; sometimes they leap across centuries. The volume thereby offers multiple trajectories of reading determined by the subject matter and the pull of the reader's fascination. The linkages discovered will be historical, but there is no one history that gives them their definitive order. Why

shouldn't this be the case? Why shouldn't an interest in Brecht lead to an interest in Grimmelshausen, a fascination with Hofmannsthal and Strauss to an appreciation of Schikaneder and Mozart?

A New History of German Literature departs from its apparent structure of the chronicle, however, in that each of the events marked by date and title also unfolds a particular theme, usually indicated in the entry's subtitle. Each entry is written in the form of an essay, literally an “attempt,” almost an “experiment.” The entries of this volume reflect not only the dynamics of their various subject matters, but also the particular interests of the individual contributors. This aspect of the book expresses the editors' assessment of the current state of literary-historical inquiry, in which various methodological paradigms coexist. It also reflects a basic fact of literary life: that works refract differently in different sensibilities, that individual texts respond to vastly different readings. We asked contributors to write according to their own best lights about what, in a given work, author, or event, spoke to them. They were required to construct their essays around a dated event, and to write an essay of a certain length, but the angle of thematic interest was left to the individual authors. This compositional strategy fit well with our vision of the book as an interdisciplinary forum on the traditions and ruptures of German culture and enabled us to include, along with essays by literary scholars, contributions by musicologists, philosophers, art and theater historians, historians of ideas, and specialists on cinema and popular culture. The result is a volume that displays the scope and richness of contemporary research devoted to the German past and present.

The variety of critical methods represented in *A New History of German Literature* is counterbalanced by a common set of themes that recur throughout the entire volume. The first bears on the changing conceptions of time and tradition that inform the self-understanding of writers and readers. Historical time is not a homogeneous medium that the historian can simply presuppose, but is itself in flux. The task is to grasp the ongoing reconstruction of the semantic frameworks within which time is experienced. Thus, many individual entries highlight particular ways of understanding temporality at particular historical moments and show how these conceptions determine the shape of the material they are presenting. In addition, we have included several entries that are specifically devoted to conceptualizations of time and history, from the *Weltchronik* of Rudolph von Ems to Hegel's proclamation of the “end of art,” from Jacob Burckhardt's evocation of the Italian Renaissance to W. G. Sebald's melancholic meditation on the devastations of the Second World War. Finally, by refusing to map the manifold relations of historical reality onto what the novelist Robert Musil referred to as the “one-dimensional thread of narration,” we have endeavored to preserve the novelty and surprise that characterize the historical present.

A second thematic strand that runs through the work bears on the larger linguistic, cultural, and political unities within which literary activity operates. Although the concept “German” defines the field from which we have made our selections, it is employed in a flexible way throughout the book. One of

the features that distinguishes German history from that of France, England, and Spain, after all, is the relatively late achievement of a unified and centralized national state, in 1871. At least eight cities can boast of having been the German capital at one time or another, and the boundaries of Germany remained a matter of contention through most of the 20th century. Even if the concept "German" is used in the linguistic sense, it fails to do justice to the complexity of the literary-historical field. *A New History of German Literature* attempts to reflect the complexity inherent in the term "German" by highlighting political and linguistic variety, by considering the perspectives of outsiders and exiles, and by stressing the European—indeed, the global—context of German literary culture. For instance, because a book written by a French speaker in Swiss exile (Germaine de Staël's *De l'Allemagne*, 1810) shaped the international image of the German literary tradition in decisive ways, it is discussed in the volume. In general, we have tried to emphasize geographical diversity and shifting political contexts, stressing, for example, that the greatest German philosopher of the late Middle Ages, Nicholas of Cusa, spent much of his life in Rome as advisor to three popes; that Charles I, the founder of the first German university in Prague, was in contact with the Italian Humanist Petrarch; that the name of Alexander von Humboldt is memorialized across the maps of North and South America. Indeed, *Dr. Faustus* (1947), perhaps the most significant novelistic exploration of the German artistic tradition, was written by a resident of California and its allusions to contemporary events were often drawn from the pages of *Time* magazine.

The third major thematic concern of the volume is the changing configurations of the media of storage and transmission. There was a time when the term "literature" designated simply all that is written. With the Romantics, the term came to mean "imaginative writing," a definition that still delimits most literary histories. Contemporary scholarship, however, has complicated both these understandings considerably. Thus, entries on manuscript production and collecting, on Gutenberg's invention of moveable type, and on the normalization of a national language are included in this volume, as are entries on pictorial display, on poetic-musical forms, on the cinema and radio plays, even on television, museums, and public festivals. The idea is not merely to expand the canon of literary history, but to call attention to the evolution of literature.

These three topics take *A New History of German Literature* beyond the three parameters of traditional literary histories: continuous narrative time, the cultural space of the "nation," and imaginative writing. Our goal is to provide an account of German literary history that focuses on "the interaction of different spaces and times," that mirrors the fluctuations of linguistic and national identity characteristic of literary activity throughout its history, and that highlights the variety and interaction of media. This inclusiveness forced us to accept some rather painful exclusions as well, but selection is endemic to historical representation. Indeed, one of the virtues of the form of presentation chosen here is that it calls attention to the fact that other choices might have been made. As our title indicates, this is a history of German literature. It is a

history, however, that does not impose a single order on the material, but rather traces many strands within it. The ideas of datable event, encounter, and constellation from which we have derived the volume's organizational strategy permit its readers to discover some of these different strands. In following their own itineraries of reading, they will be struck by historical patterns—echoes, influences, similarities, contrasts—that we have only been able to hint at in the cross-references suggested at the end of each entry. Readers will uncover more of these configurations each time they explore the book. The order of history this volume evokes is in fact an array of orders that is reorganized with every reading.

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