PROJECT MUSE®

History, Fiction, and Germany: Writing the
Nineteenth-Century Nation (review)

Jeffrey L. Sammons

Monatshefte, Volume 99, Number 1, Spring 2007, pp. 118-120 (Review)

Published by University of Wisconsin Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mon.2007.0015>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/212813>

ontogeny in German Romanticism' can be traced back to Herder, whose *Ideas* are quoted by Schelling in his *Draft* and cited frequently by the naturalists of the period" (154). Ziolkowski points to Gotthilf Heinrich Schubert, "the leading promulgator and popularizer of *Naturphilosophie*" (155), who came under the personal influence of Herder in Weimar and whose greatest work "bears more than a superficial resemblance to the *Ideas* of his mentor Herder" (156). As a scholar who has devoted many years and pages to trying to establish the importance of this connection, I welcome Ziolkowski's book as congenially as he welcomed the parallel endeavors of Robert Richards.

Rice University

—John H. Zammito

History, Fiction, and Germany: Writing the Nineteenth-Century Nation.

By Brent O. Peterson. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005. viii + 360 pages. \$54.95.

The imagining of a sense of national identity and its evolution from constructed myth to widely shared conviction has become a prominent topic of cultural and literary analysis. It is particularly significant in the case of Germany in view of its rapid development from a congeries of loyalties to principalities large and small along with unclear geographical and linguistic definitions at the beginning of the nineteenth century to a widely shared *kleindeutsch* patriotism under Prussian auspices after unification in 1871. Brent Peterson sees this change of consciousness as having been imaged in literature: "When consensus about a German identity finally arrived, if it ever did, it was almost certainly mediated in fictional form" (75). This is not, however, primarily a matter of the canonical tradition; except for Kleist and agitators like Arndt and Körner, "national literature" was not "synonymous with the literature of nationalism," which sought "a level of literary quality on a par with France and England" (74). The project of imagining the nation is more to be found in popular literature, in the historical novels that large numbers of people read. There are some well-known names here, such as Fontane and Fanny Lewald, in addition to authors on the periphery of the cultural memory like Fouqué or Alexis, and a number of others most of us are unlikely to have read or even heard of. A central figure is Luise Mühlbach, whose cause Peterson has been championing for some time, though not on qualitative grounds. He admits that "most of what ordinary people read was produced by writers of middling ability"; "some texts may be dreadful" (25). The historical novel competed with the rise of narrative history by imagining personal characteristics and private sensibilities, especially of ordinary people normally not within the purview of academic history.

Peterson has examined a large corpus of texts, finding in his extremely detailed observations not a linear evolution but a wide variety of opinions and insecurities of attitude about the definition and boundaries of "Germany," the identification of and the relationship to legitimate authority, and the prospects for the future. Much of his discussion is concentrated on several historical nodes and the ways in which their understanding was rewritten in fiction. One of these is the evolution of Friedrich II to "Old Fritz," from the dour, misanthropic, French-speaking, ruthless military aggressor to "Germany's favorite uncle," who "becomes a commoner," "wise and approachable, feared yet benevolent, just, and most important, prototypically German" (101, 96, 98),

for whom love interests, preferably heterosexual, had to be devised. There are many varied examples in the texts, but Mühlbach's fifteen-volume portrait is crucial. If Fritz was made into Germany's uncle, Queen Luise was imaged as Germany's mother; the much-vaunted virtuous domesticity of the Prussian royal couple is a symptom of the embourgeoisement of the national discourse. However, her husband, Friedrich Wilhelm III, did not, to put it mildly, do much for the national cause, and a particularly sensitive node of the discourse was the Prussian defeat at Jena in 1806. Here the major examples are Fanny Lewald's *Prinz Louis Ferdinand*, which was embarrassing to the court and in which "Prussian society is rotten and about to collapse" (157), and Alexis's *Ruhe ist die erste Bürgerpflicht*, an angry novel impelled by the author's discovery that his Prussian patriotism was not welcomed by the ruling powers and concerning which Peterson is more thoughtful and perceptive than many other observers. The rise from the ignominy of 1806 was supposed to have occurred in the Wars of Liberation, but even here the discourse is varied and sometimes uncertain. Peterson points out that the Brockhaus of 1836, presumably to avoid the implications of "Freiheit," enters "Freiheitskriege" under "Russisch-deutscher Krieg von 1812–1815," still the case in my Brockhaus of 1864. Peterson includes Fritz Reuter's *Ut de Franzosentid* (cited not from the original but from a standard German version of 1976), Louise von François's *Die letzte Reckenburgerin*, and, unexpectedly, Karl May's *Die Liebe des Ulanen*, but the main focus is on Fontane's *Vor dem Sturm* and the final segment of Freytag's *Die Ahnen*. As authors gained experience with the Wilhelminian Reich, the national cause occasionally began to lose some of its luster, as in Spielhagen's bitterly despairing *Noblesse oblige* and, to me a rather surprising discovery, Sudermann's *Der Katzensteg*.

Peterson's vast overview of the literary record is set firmly in a historical context. Since in places he seems to wonder about the bourgeois attachment to royalty, something more might have been said about the persistent liberal project of forming an alliance with monarchy against the aristocracy and the uneducated classes, which climaxed but did not end with the Frankfurt Parliament's absurd offer of the imperial crown to Friedrich Wilhelm IV. While Peterson is not doctrinaire about denying the boundary between fiction and history, I am still more inclined to maintain it; as I used to say to students in resistance to Hayden White, there is no historiography in which Napoleon defeated Russia, while a novel based on such a premise is easy to imagine. Peterson asserts: "Both Mühlbach and Ranke must let Frederick die in 1786; they can neither change the outcome of his battles nor invent visits to his palace by aliens from outer space" (46), but I do not see why not unless the authors suppose themselves to be supplementary historians. We have fictions in which the South won the Civil War, the Nazis occupied England, and a para-fascist Lindbergh became president of the United States. The problem is illustrated by Mühlbach, who, judging from the one novel of hers I managed to read to the end, *Königin Hortense*, writes not historical novels but what we might call non-fiction novels. She does create scenes of private life, personal relations, and emotional states, but her novel has no literary dimension and plods along like an extended encyclopedia article.

Peterson's style is sprightly with flashes of wit, a pleasure to read. Everything is put implacably into English, including sometimes proper names, not only of royal figures: Queen Luise, Luise Mühlbach, and Louise von François all appear as "Louisa," Mühlbach even in the bibliography. The German originals of the cited texts are rele-

gated to the notes; once again it would serve the convenience of the reader if academic book designers could be persuaded to put notes at the bottom of the page instead of in the back. These are just nit-picks, however; the book illuminates the convoluted generation of the nationalistic discourse in Germany, effectively countering still-circulating simplistic notions about “the Germans.” We must be grateful to Peterson for devoting himself to so much of what we, in all probability, would prefer not to read, and we will not envy him his long hours with Luise Mühlbach.

New Haven, Connecticut

—Jeffrey L. Sammons

Das verschlafene 19. Jahrhundert? Zur deutschen Literatur zwischen Klassik und Moderne.

Herausgegeben von Hans-Jörg Knobloch und Helmut Koopmann. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2005. 205 Seiten. €26,00.

The distinctive status of nineteenth-century German-language** literature (as contrasted with social realism in other European traditions) has been much discussed. [**Note: Both in the volume under review and here, “German literature” refers to Austrian and Swiss literature as well.] The decisive effects of the belated founding of the German nation in 1871 are well-known: for much of the century there was no single urban center, so that the sociogeographic tension between the capital and the provinces—a phenomenon fundamental to English and French realist fiction—was absent; the self-identification of the writing and reading population was provincial rather than national; and industrialization—a major focus of European social realism—advanced at a slower rate because it was local and particular rather than unified. But assessments of the concomitant literary production differ widely. They are often negative, tracing the path forged by Georg Lukács and Erich Auerbach, who decried the narrowly provincial, epigonal, and otherworldly quality of nineteenth-century German literature; others, following the turn in scholarship brought about by Richard Brinkmann, praise the narrative innovations of nineteenth-century German literature and redefine realism accordingly. *Das verschlafene 19. Jahrhundert* takes a polemical approach to a study belonging to the first category, Heinz Schlaffer’s controversial *Die kurze Geschichte der deutschen Literatur* (2002), which reduces German literature to a few noteworthy epochs and characterizes the period between 1830 and 1900 as stagnant.

The thirteen essays in the volume at hand were prepared for a symposium devoted to Schlaffer’s book that took place in South Africa in March 2004. The collection is international, including contributors working in India, South Africa, France, and the United States as well as Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. The authors treat the titular subject from a range of perspectives, but several leading themes and dichotomies emerge. For example, the tension between the epigonal and the progressive is a defining current, its particular parameters indicated by the volume’s subtitle. Contributors take differing stances on the influence of the classical-romantic era. Hans-Jörg Knobloch downplays it, arguing that politics has a stronger impact than religion on nineteenth-century literature. Theo Elm elucidates Büchner’s satire of romantic idealist thought in *Leonce und Lena*, and Manfred Misch shows the ways in which Wilhelm Busch’s poetry thwarts the moral and aesthetic standards still held by authors and readers in the post-Goethean era. By contrast, Keith Bullivant notes that the social